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164-PAGE SPECIAL

Issue No. **458**

Yearbook 2019

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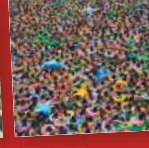
96 essential audio treats to make music sound great...

■ Network players ■ Loudspeakers ■ One-box solutions ■ DACs



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[studio]

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WIN! IsoTek's Evo3 Sigmas mains conditioner


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The Good, The Bad & The Queen
 Merrie Land

Picture credit: Pennie Smith

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS


EDITOR'S CHOICE:
 Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

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 Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

GROUP TEST WINNER:
 Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!


Welcome to *HFC's* 13th issue of 2019 – a 164-page Yearbook special that celebrates the year's hi-fi high-points. Inside we've packed more reviews than ever before, highlighting the real strength of today's stereo audio sector with a diverse range of components that cater for all

kinds of music listener. Each of the products selected for this ultimate product guide is a coveted *Hi-Fi Choice* badge winner, applauded by our team of expert reviewers for a winning combination of outstanding sound quality and value for money – prices shown are from the time of original publication.

2019 has been a year of change in the audio industry with some unexpected losses, but through mergers and diversification many familiar brands are stronger and in better shape for 2020 – see p151 for a reminder of where high-street music retailer HMV was at this time last year, before it moved to new ownership and opened Europe's largest music store in October.

Lastly, make sure you enter our fantastic competition on p114 to be in with a chance of winning IsoTek's Evo3 Sigmas mains conditioner worth £3,252. Good luck!

Lee Dunkley Editor

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worth
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p114

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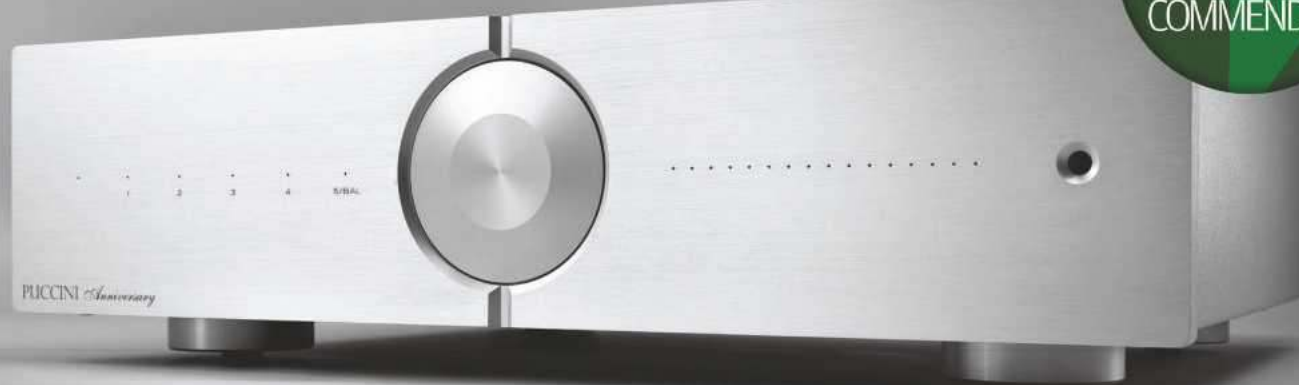
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- James Parker/Paul Miller, HiFi News

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HiFi News, July 2019



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0141 333 9700

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0113 217 7294

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AVID

Ingenium Plug&Play

AVID's Ingenium Plug&Play turntable is part of an increasingly familiar breed of packaged decks that allow vinyl fans to get on with the business of playing records without the fuss of a complex setup procedure. This means that the tonearm and cartridge come fitted, aligned and ready to play and all you have to do is simply slide the counterweight into position to be up and running in next to no time.

Unlike the Cambridgeshire-based company's original Ingenium deck reviewed in 2013 (*HFC* 379), this packaged version includes a threaded spindle and platter clamp, which AVID says play an essential role in the deck's energy dissipation process. The motor is separate from the main chassis and is positioned beneath the cork-topped MDF main platter to drive the sub-platter via a rubber belt. The in-line power switch has been updated to suit balanced mains being introduced in various countries, but its location feels a little awkward.

Sound quality

Connecting the AVID to a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (*HFC* 408) and running it in for a few hours, I kick off proceedings with Jon Allen's *Deep River* and the basics are all well handled from the outset. There is nothing in the way of any

audible noise floor and the pitch stability is extremely good. *Hummingbird Blues* is rich, tonally believable and exceptionally even across the frequency range. Thanks to the low noise floor, it has no trouble finding the little snippets of information that can sometimes be lost in the mix. The lack of emphasis on any part of the audible spectrum ensures that the presentation feels effortlessly even handed.

Kamasi Washington's *Humility* is opened out in such a way that you can sense individuals at work without losing the focus on the exceptional saxophone work. There is a wonderful presence and texture to the instrumentation and the AVID is able to generate a sense of depth and three dimensionality that isn't always present when played elsewhere.

Most notable, though, is the bass response. The Ingenium Plug&Play effortlessly delivers the sort of low frequencies that only truly well-sorted turntables can muster. The kick drum in Fink's *Sort Of Revolution* is a thump that's full of depth, control and tonal richness. From the moment the lower midrange starts to become bass, there is a heft to it that is perfectly judged – weighty without tipping over into being dominating or overblown.

AVID has long prioritised accuracy, detail and a sort of unvarnished truth to the way its products make music.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AVID Ingenium Plug&Play
PRICE
£1,250
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
5.9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
370 x 130 x 305mm
FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• Factory-fitted tonearm & cartridge
• Supplied clamp
DISTRIBUTOR
AVID HiFi Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01480 869900
WEBSITE
avidhifi.com
REVIEWED
HFC 444

The balance here is slightly different. This is still a very accurate and revealing turntable, but it offsets this against a rhythmic energy and sense of fun that makes listening a truly enjoyable experience. Amadou and Miriam's *Bofou Salou* hammers along with a fantastic combination of rhythmic precision and sheer musical energy. What is no less important is that this force doesn't make itself felt in more gentle pieces of music, although the same sense of keen timing remains present.

Cymbals and high treble can reveal a slightly splashy quality at times and it displays some brief issues tracking careworn pressings that are not generally a problem with other decks, but these challenges prove few and far between.

Conclusion

The Plug&Play is a subtly different beast from the original Ingenium and, in many ways, makes more sense. It delivers the virtues that AVID holds dear while being easy to get up and running. Its slightly limited upgrade path might put some off, but the level of performance on offer from the design as it stands will be everything many vinyl fans desire. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Spacious and detailed performance; build; simple setup
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly hard treble; limited upgrade path; no dust cover
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A different take on the all-in-one turntable package that's remarkably effective and attractive
FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



AnalogueWorks TT Zero

REPRESENTING A DECENT turntable starter package, the TT Zero's spec incorporates a Jelco TS-550S 9in tonearm, Audio-Technica VM740ML moving-magnet cartridge and Easy VTA adjuster. Built around a solid birch ply plinth, the Zero has a high-mass aluminium platter supported in a leaded bronze bearing that you have to spin up to speed by hand as it has insufficient torque to overcome the platter's inertia from rest. If you want to get 'hands on', this is your deck.

According to AnalogueWorks designer Tim Chorlton, all the materials and shapes have been chosen to balance or prevent resonance, but the aesthetic upshot is very pleasing, too. He also mentions that replacing the standard Black Eye power supply with the Wave Mechanic One PSU £500 is an easy and effective upgrade.

Sound quality

From the start the TT Zero is pristine without being bright, has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops as it should. As *Everything But The Girl's Missing* kicks off, I'm taken by the expansive stereo, solid grasp of rhythm and big, pure presence of the vocals. This half-speed Abbey Road Studios re-master sounds open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and clean, controlled, tuneful bass.

Moving onto Eels' *Beautiful Freak*, my attention is initially drawn to what sounds like mildly emphasised sibilance as Mark Oliver Everett narrates his way through *Susan's House*. But it soon dawns that it's the way 'sss' really sounds. All right, it's a heavily processed track with a deliberately skewed dynamic that isn't meant to sound cohesive, but unpicking the strands and samples is



half the fun and something that the TT Zero does with impressive ease and no hint of blur or smear.

Boz Scaggs' smooth, affectingly adenoidal tenor hits the spot on the rather lovely *Rock And Stick* with its jazzy massed guitar arpeggios and burst of baleful harmonica conveyed with fully realised expression and note shaping by Jack Walroth. With super-crisp drumming and well-proportioned bass, the TT Zero certainly doesn't do overblown. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AnalogueWorks
TT Zero

PRICE
£1,500

TELEPHONE
01536 762211

WEBSITE
analogueworks.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 453

OUR VERDICT



EAT Prelude

THE PRELUDE'S TONEARM incorporates a headshell optimised for moving-magnet cartridges. The bearing housing is designed to act as a sink, pulling vibrations away from the playing surface. Conical spikes are also employed to combat vibration, while the direct current motor is placed in its own dedicated housing. There is no speed control, instead the belt is moved between upper and lower pulleys. An Ortofon 2M Red cartridge is fitted and correctly aligned so that setup is limited to fitting the antiskating weight and setting tracking force.

Sound quality

Connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (HFC 408), the Prelude is completely silent and a quick strobe test suggests it is admirably pitch stable too. With the basics handled, it doesn't take very long to

establish that it delivers EAT's philosophy of a 'neutral' turntable.

Kicking off with the hauntingly beautiful *Cascades* collaboration between pianist Jean-Michel Blais and electronic composer CFCF, the piano sits centre stage in the recording with the strike and decay of notes delivered with real presence. The performance is placed in a convincingly open and three-dimensional soundstage that extends effortlessly beyond the confines of the speakers.

The more congested *Tomorrow's Harvest* by Boards Of Canada has a convincing balance of scale and three dimensionality. This openness is combined with an impressive level of refinement too. I often find the 2M Red a little fatiguing in some setups, but here it is difficult to unsettle and even the brittle pressing of *Resistance Is Futile* by Manic Street Preachers is handled convincingly.



Where this neutrality is less of an advantage is with faster material. It never tips over into sounding slow or confused, but Amadou and Mariam's *La Confusion* lacks some of the usual get up and go I know the track has.

For anyone wanting to avoid any form of embellishment in their vinyl replay, this package delivers on the neutral virtues that EAT has set out to create. If you're looking to construct a vinyl-playing setup that focuses on accuracy and tonal refinement, this competitively priced turntable should be high on your wishlist. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
EAT Prelude

PRICE
£1,000

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
absolutesounds.com

REVIEWED
HFC 450

OUR VERDICT



Pro-Ject Primary E Phono

FOLLOWING THE LAUNCH of its Primary E turntable with cartridge in 2018, Pro-Ject's Primary E Phono package adds a built-in moving-magnet phono stage for just £50 more. As a complete starter option it can be connected to any amplifier or active speaker system with a stereo RCA line-level input without anything additional needed.

The phono stage is positioned on the underside of the plinth and provides gain for the pre-mounted Ortofon OM cartridge. A switch on the side enables you to bypass the built-in preamp to hook up an external preamp stage and there's a grounding post too.

Sound quality

Connecting up the Primary E to my home setup reveals that as a value package, the Phono version makes a lot of sense. The urgent and slightly

dark tone of the Slow Readers Club's *Build A Tower* is well captured and the pitch stability ensures the Pro-Ject consistently engages on a rhythmic level. This is helped by respectable bass depth and detail. Compared with some more expensive designs, there isn't quite the same hit to the chest from the percussion, but the articulation and integration is good enough to ensure that you don't feel short changed.

Morcheeba's *The Sea* has a level of refinement that isn't always found with affordable hardware. Skye Edwards' vocals are rich with an almost liquid quality that makes for an engaging listen. Even slightly edgy pressings like Bloc Party's *A Weekend In The City* sound exciting without becoming hard or overly forward.

Very large-scale material can start to highlight some of the limitations of the built-in phono stage, but the



manner in which these restrictions make themselves felt is fairly benign, with the sense that something like Kamasi Washington's *Harmony Of Difference* happens between the loudspeakers rather than simply extending beyond them. Most importantly, this rarely translates into actual congestion. With smaller scale material this benefits the presentation enormously by lending it a feeling of focus and drive that gels with the decent timing to make for a genuinely exciting listen. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject
Primary E Phono

PRICE
£200

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 444

OUR VERDICT



Technics SL-1500C

THE CLOSEST APPROACH to Technics' flagship SL-1000R for less than a grand, the SL-1500C uses a coreless direct-drive motor with sophisticated speed management circuitry housed within a beefy, well-damped chassis and, just like its sibling, has an S-shaped tonearm with detachable headshell.

It also features a built-in MM phono stage and pre-fitted Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, while the high-torque coreless motor is claimed to have all but eliminated cogging for rock-solid speed stability.

The aluminium platter is fairly lightweight, but is damped on its underside to kill resonances while the apparent simplicity of the plinth disguises a sophisticated blend of aluminium, ABS and glass fibre that optimise rigidity and control vibration. Even before settling back to listen, the immediate acceleration

of the platter looks like magic after the hand spins that are often needed to get some belt-drive designs going.

Sound quality

The built-in phono stage is terrific and really suits the potent delivery. There's something deliciously unstoppable and dramatic about the take-no-prisoners sonic personality. With up-tempo material it sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. I have to keep checking Ortofon's 2M Red is in the headshell, as it sounds like a far more expensive and dynamic cartridge.

This is a turntable that vigorously grabs your attention, using the torque and stability of its direct-drive motor to lock down timing and rhythms with startling start-stop precision. This is backed up with an uncanny sense of presence and projection, wonderfully firm, deep and expressive bass and an over-arching impression



of impetus and authority. There's real heft in the presentation combined with speed and precision that injects life into music and gives Everything But The Girl's *Missing* an appealingly muscular makeover.

The sheer focus and physicality it lends Eels' *Susan's House* is something of a marvel, while Oscar Peterson's fiercely fast and powerful ivory hammering on *Naptown Blues* is classic 'hairs on the back of the neck' stuff. This is palpable, vivid, vibrant music making that really captures the essence of a performance. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Technics SL-1500C

PRICE
£900

TELEPHONE
0333 2228777

WEBSITE
technics.com/uk

REVIEWED
HFC 453

OUR VERDICT





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philips.com/headphones



Pro-Ject X1

Available for £700 as supplied here with matching cartridge or £600 without, the X1 utilises a 8.6in tonearm made from a carbon and aluminium sandwich construction – claimed to be light and stiff. It's a one-piece design and comes with Pro-Ject's TPE-damped counterweight; it can be easily set for azimuth and VTA adjustment from its sturdy aluminium base. It has a Kardan ultra-low friction four-pin point precision bearing, and the review sample comes pre-fitted with Pro-Ject's new Pick-IT S2 MM cartridge, manufactured by Ortofon.

The plinth uses a new denser MDF material that's less resonant and it gets eight layers of paint with a hand-polished gloss finish. Height adjustable feet are fitted, with useful isolation properties and the 1.5kg platter has a heavier, low-resonance acrylic design. The motor is better isolated and now gets its juice from a DC/AC generator rather than being powered direct from the mains, and there's a push-button three-speed control. The company's Connect-IT E shielded RCA cable is bundled and the X1 is available in a choice of walnut wood veneer and black or white gloss paint finishes, and feels of decent quality at the price.

Sound quality

This is an affordable turntable that doesn't sound anything like one. Any shortcomings aren't such that they interfere with the enjoyment of the

music; instead you're left focusing on just how good vinyl can sound when given half a chance.

The X1 gives a big, open and engulfing sound and recreates the recorded acoustic of a Deutsche Grammophon pressing of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* surprisingly well, locating all the different parts of the orchestra convincingly. Of course, being a low-cost turntable it doesn't focus right in on individual soloists as well as some more expensive designs, yet it still delivers an expansive soundstage.

Instrumental timbre is very good. Cheap record players can sound weedy and anaemic, but the X1 is impressive. It delivers a lovely, natural tone to the violins and cellos, rather than turning them into a thin, monochrome facsimile. This is all the more apparent with some classic electronic music as *Love Action* by The Human League is rendered in a surprisingly rich and vibrant way. Those old analogue synthesisers have a depth of tone and a sonorousness that I wasn't expecting from a turntable of this price. Lead vocals are very natural, and the deck shows no sign of mistracking, nervousness or instability – certainly considering its price. The only criticism is a slight opaqueness to the midband, but you have to spend a good deal more money to better this.

Speed stability is impressive, if not quite as good as its nearest Rega rival (the Planar 3, HFC 411), although it never sounds obviously wobbly. The

big bass guitar line of Siouxsie and the Banshees' *Israel* is delivered clearly and with surprisingly good attack. At the same time, the snare and hi-hat work sound crisp and the ride cymbal clean and smear free. Indeed the X1 gives a surprisingly propulsive rendition that makes this classic new-wave track great fun to listen to. It slots all this together very well with the haunting lead rhythm guitar work and the careful phrasing of the vocals. The overall effect is lithe and bouncy, with the turntable very much the master rather than struggling to keep up with the pace.

Conclusion

Pro-Ject's X1 is a highly impressive turntable package for the price, but no shortcut to high-end analogue replay. It makes music in a happy, engaging and big-hearted way and has no real weak points to spoil your enjoyment. You can get a cleaner, sharper and more precise sound from your records, but you'll have to spend more to do so. Don't be fooled by the similarities to Pro-Ject's debut deck, the X1 is worlds apart and shows how far the turntable market has evolved, making it an essential audition for those on a tight budget. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Audio Systems X1
PRICE
£700
ORIGIN
Austria
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
7kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
415 x 125 x 335mm
FEATURES
• 33, 45 & 78rpm
• Fitted with Pro-Ject Pick-IT S2 MM cartridge
• Electronic speed control
• Dustcover supplied
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 452

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Enjoyable and engaging sound; fitted cartridge
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks the precision and dynamics of some rivals
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent low-cost turntable package with an upbeat sound
FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL





Rega Planar 10

The latest Planar turntable is one of Rega's most sophisticated yet, particularly with the new Apheta 3 cartridge on board

Rega has managed to re-energise its expansive range of turntables and keep us in a spin with a combination of intriguing and unexpected technical changes that are considerably more than simply a style makeover. At first glance, the Planar 10 (£3,600 without cartridge) looks remarkably similar to the Planar 8 introduced last year (*HFC* 443), but these visual cues hide an almost completely new turntable that continues to develop themes and practises from the company's flagship Naiad – the custom design that's built in extremely limited numbers and represents something of a concept product and testbed for new ideas.

The Planar 8 already incorporates a good deal of the company's design

thinking, but the Planar 10 is more ambitious in that it sets out to be an easier to produce representation of the Naiad at a more affordable price. To do this, it takes some aspects of the Planar 8 and mixes it with new components and materials. Although this isn't the first time Rega has employed ceramic elements in its design – both the preceding RP10 and P9 turntables utilised the material – the Planar 10 has a ceramic platter partnered to a ceramic top brace that takes the company's 'stressed beam' idea of maximising the rigidity between the bearing and arm board further than ever before.

This rigid ceramic top brace is combined with Rega's desire to eliminate mass from the rest of the turntable, which is a skeletal plinth of

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Planar 10/
Apheta 3

PRICE
£4,500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
4.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
420 x 125 x 315mm

FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• Tancast 8 foam
plinth surrounded
by HPL casing
• Ceramic platter
and brace
• RB3000 tonearm
with optional
Apheta 3 cartridge
• PL10 PSU with
DSP control

DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01702 333071

WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 456

sandwiched Tancast 8 foam between two layers of high-pressure laminate similar to that found on the Planar 8. There are differences between the two – the bearing housing of the Planar 10 is a new one-piece bearing and sub-platter that is mounted in such a way as to eliminate vibration. A 24V motor is mounted to the plinth from the underside and the two components are joined by a pair of drive belts constructed from Rega's own EBLT rubber with a perfectly circular cross section. The Planar 10 has the same footprint as the Planar 8 and can be wall mounted using the same £135 bracket.

The Planar 10 never loses sight of the idea of musical joy being the main goal

Evolving from its predecessor, the updated PL10 PSU uses a DSP-driven, crystal-based system to ensure accurate speed control. It's housed in a new casework design that shares some styling cues with the company's £3,000 Aethos integrated amp (*HFC* 457) and gives electronic speed selection via the front panel buttons.

Another significant update is to the tonearm. The RB3000 is visually



similar to the preceding RB2000 with its striking aluminium and hand-polished finish, but it's an all-new design. The most significant difference is the bearing assembly that uses new construction techniques within micrometre tolerances, combined with a design that places the smallest number of mechanical joints in the arm. It's supplied with a relatively light counterweight as standard that works perfectly with the



Apheta 3 moving-coil cartridge that's bundled and fitted as part of the £4,500 package that's reviewed here, although a heavier counterweight is also available if required.

The attention to detail that's been lavished on the Planar 10 combines to create a turntable that feels at once familiar yet at the same time very different. It's solid and beautifully made while the extra refinements make it feel more special than its already exceptional Planar 8 sibling – the 10's tonearm in particular is a work of entirely functional art. It's practical too, thanks to the plinth's small footprint and ingenious dust cover that comes supplied.

Sound quality

Connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (HFC 408), Naim Supernait 3 integrated (p76) and Focal Kanta N°1 standmount (HFC 454), the Planar 10's sound emulates its looks with elements that are familiar interspersed with intriguing new developments. It's very much in keeping with Rega's turntable sound and is so effortlessly rhythmic that The Comet Is Coming's *Super Zodiac* makes the lossless digital streaming version I know well sound almost disjointed and choppy. The Planar 10 is utterly unflappable, and I don't think a time signature exists that's able to unsettle it.

This deck is much more than a device to get the head nodding, however. Picking apart the influence of the ceramic components and that beautifully constructed tonearm is tough in isolation, but cumulatively, they amount to an effortless ability to take every nuance on a record and create a three-dimensional image that is so convincing that I feel I can walk around it. The complex and dense arrangements of Kamasi Washington's *Harmony Of Difference* are so effortlessly unpicked, it is only when you play it on a lesser turntable that you begin to appreciate just how astonishingly together it is.

The latest version of the company's Apheta moving-coil cartridge retains the virtues of its predecessor, but where the Apheta 2 could be a little unforgiving with some pressings – at least when not partnered with the mighty Aura phono stage (p110) – here it manages to keep almost everything sounding good. This still isn't the most tonally lush turntable and cartridge combination you can buy, but neither is it likely to see you leave any records on the shelf.

In fact, the Planar 10 has the ability to make you want to listen to long

side-lined albums in order to see what it can do with them. The manner in which it sets about the eponymously titled album from the Brand New Heavies is a deeply impressive experience as this fine pressing positively sings. The tonality of the instruments is correct without ever being matter of fact. The rasp of the brass on *People Get Ready* is vibrant and entirely tangible. Everything bursts into life in a wholly convincing way and the interplay between the performers is completely compelling.

The cleverest part of the Planar 10's arsenal of attributes is that it never loses sight of the idea of musical joy being the main goal, but can also lay claim to being an analogue playback source that can be considered a reference. The challenging but wonderful pressing of Nils Frahm's *Spaces* is conveyed with a weight and presence to the piano playing and is flawlessly recreated as the Apheta 3 cartridge's incredible detail retrieval combined with the deck's naturally low noise floor is enough to unearth tiny details that turn the presentation into a captivating performance.

Conclusion

Given that the Planar 10 shares concepts and design ideas with the Planar 8, which was one of our favourite turntables of 2018, it doesn't come as a surprise to see that this is something of a superstar. What is surprising, however, is that even allowing for the significant price increase, this is more of a leap forward in performance terms than the superficially similar appearance of the two models might suggest. It manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at the relatively lofty price point, and it does so while retaining the same joy and charm the company holds dear. The Planar 10 is a masterpiece and pairing it with the Apheta 3 cart is one of the company's finest achievements. **ES**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Outstanding sound quality; well made and easy to use
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Lacks a truly protective cover
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: It's price may be high, but performance sets a new standard that rivals even more expensive designs
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





NEW!



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* Roon Ready with future software update.



Reloop Turn5

Reloop has been making pro audio equipment since 1996, and formed a specialist hi-fi division two years ago. Distributed through Henley Audio in the UK, the Turn5 is the top model in its range – to all intents a close looking copy of Technics' SL-1200, without the variable speed control and in a different finish.

The full-size 332mm platter is gold anodised, has substantial rubber damping underneath and weighs 1.8kg. The motor is a brushless, 16-pole, three-phase, directly driven DC affair able to spin the platter at 33, 45 and 78rpm.

The statically balanced S-shaped tonearm isn't up to the quality of the Technics original, but it's on another level to most other copies. With the supplied headshell it tracks cartridges between 3.5 and 8.5g and comes with an Ortofon 2M Red moving magnet cartridge (HFC 345).

Sound quality

The Turn5 is fast, clean and detailed with a performance that's close to what you would expect from decent direct drives. It has a tight, controlled and grippy sound that plays records in a very matter of fact way.

Spin The Police's *Wrapped Around Your Finger* and the Reloop sounds grippy and sinewy, keeping hold of the drum, bass guitar and rhythm tracks with real precision. It's so crisp that you're really able to appreciate the firecracker snare and rim shot fills, while the bass drum is like being

thumped in the chest when played loud. It's hard to believe that you're listening to a turntable of this price, such is its overall control.

The midband is clear and controlled, but doesn't quite have the same width as the best belt drives at this price. Instead, its metronomic precision draws attention away from a slightly curtailed stereo spread. It falls back fairly well, showing this is more than just a two-dimensional performer.

Tonally this is a pretty neutral turntable, with a slightly weightier bass than many price rivals, and a highly detailed midband allied to a lively treble. There's no sense of it sounding strident or rough – as some cheap direct drives do. Instead it fires lots of detail at you and lets you enjoy different strands of the mix. By contrast, many belt-driven price rivals are reduced to an amorphous blob of music. I cue up Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* and am transfixed. The crisp, even, balanced and controlled sound doesn't seem cheap, yet there is a real impetus to the song's infectious rhythms as they snake along. The solid plinth and super-stable drive system at least partially explain its thick low bass, which gives great weight to piano. At the same time, the ride cymbal work up top is well etched and smooth without being bland. Indeed, you can clearly hear the attack of the drumstick upon the cymbal much better than the vast majority of decks at this price.

It falls to a classic slice of reggae in the shape of Gregory Isaacs' glorious

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Reloop Turn5

PRICE
£650

ORIGIN
Germany/China

TYPE
Direct-drive
turntable

WEIGHT
12.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
458 x 162 x 368mm

FEATURES
• Electronic
33/45/78rpm
speed change
• Quartz-locked
direct-drive motor
• Fitted with
Ortofon 2M Red
moving-magnet
cartridge
• S-shaped tonearm

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 446

Night Nurse to catch the Reloop in its element. The track's sledgehammer bass is carried with great speed and no hint of mistracking, and this same control lets it give a really accurate rendition of the texture of the lead keyboard. The sound proves really vibrant and tangible, rather than slurred and blurred as it can be with some budget turntables. It has a fundamental rightness to its sound that makes you forgive its foibles. There is a slight lessening of dynamic accenting, and the deck lacks a real 'hear through' midband that you get with the £1,300 Technics SL-1200GR (HFC 426) for example.

Conclusion

The Turn5 doesn't magically buy you high-end vinyl sound on the cheap, yet it's still a very welcome addition to the market. It offers a considerably bouncier, tighter and more animated performance than its belt-driven price rivals, with a touch more focus. The downside is that your friends might start questioning your sanity for buying – their words, not mine – “a DJ deck without pitch controls”. I'd advise rising above such silliness, because few other turntables around offer so much sound per pound. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Crisp, snappy, detailed sound; supplied cartridge

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WESAY: Fine-sounding, easy-to-use, well-made turntable

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL





SME Synergy

Precision engineering specialist SME builds one of the world's most desirable turntable packages. Prepare to be amazed...

With most all-in-one, 'starter' turntables coming in under the £1,000 price point – some much less – it's more than a little surprising to see specialist manufacturer SME introduce its own take on the format with a price tag that comes in at a little under £15k.

Formed back in 1946, the company has a reputation for excellence. This isn't just for sound, but in respect of build quality too and despite a change of ownership, we expect nothing less than genius from its Synergy offering.

The package comprises a compact new motor unit based on the Model 15, with a special tonearm that closely resembles a Series IV. This comes pre-fitted with an Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil cartridge, and there's a bespoke integrated

phono stage by Nagra, with all the wiring done by Crystal Cable.

SME's CEO Stuart McNeilis explains: "It is aimed at customers seeking a turntable solution which is factory configured, setup and ready to play... The partners we selected match the stringent ultra-high quality and reliability disciplines of SME. It was critical to partner with like-minded high-end audio manufacturers with an impeccable track record." This is made even more seamless because the company's UK distributor (Padood) also imports Nagra – so it's keeping things very much in the family.

It's part of a strategy by McNeilis – a former aerospace man, appointed as SME's head honcho by owner Ajay Shirke's Cadence group – to grow its precision engineering side in a range of

DETAILS

PRODUCT
SME Synergy
PRICE
£14,950
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
24.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
370 x 178 x 350mm
FEATURES
• 33, 45, 78rpm
• Tonearm based on SME Series IV and Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil cartridge
• Built in Nagra phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
Padood
TELEPHONE
01223 653199
WEBSITE
sme.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 448

sectors from Formula One to medical and high-end automotive. That's why it has taken the decision to get a UK distributor for its audio side, so that the company can concentrate on design and manufacturing rather than selling. Currently, about 60 percent of SME's business is hi-fi, whereas just a decade ago about 70 percent was precision engineering.

If you're a fan of the brand, the Synergy will seem very familiar, yet strangely different. As you'd expect, it plunders the SME parts bin extensively – but that's one hell of a parts bin. The deck looks like a Model 15 that's shrunk in the wash. The motor is a derivative of the one found in the Model 20, the bearing is from the Model 15, but re-engineered to work effectively with the new subchassis, and the platter is shared with the Model 15. The result is a small, compact turntable that starts with an aluminium base unit that has rubber isolators inside three pillars, to decouple it from its surroundings. It sits on three adjustable feet. The upper tier carries the arm mounting, bearing assembly and inner platter; the motor is decoupled from the chassis by rubber bands.

There's also an electronic speed control unit that's housed in a one-piece CNC machined case, and gives microprocessor-controlled speed via a

closed loop servo system, with 33, 45 and 78rpm with ± 0.01 percent fine pitch speed adjustment. It spins the 4.6kg platter up to speed quickly, and is topped by a special mat. The phono preamplifier is built in, but has a separate power supply (not shown) attached to the deck via its own cable.

The arm is basically an SME Series IV, but with new Synergy livery on its lightweight diecast magnesium tube. It gets special Crystal Cable Monocrystal internal wiring and phono cables. The arm bearings are superb, with a lovely feel when hand cueing, thanks in large part to the 10mm ABEC 3 ball bearing races. The yoke is mounted to the 23mm diameter heat-treated, ground and honed steel pillar, with a pair of 17mm ABEC 7 ball bearing races, widely spaced to resist tilt.

Sound quality

The highly capable Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti moving-coil comes pre-fitted and aligned, so all you need to do is take the stylus guard off and you're good to go – something that even I can manage without breaking anything. What strikes you about the Synergy is that there's something almost magical about the sound – cue up your favourite record and you can't help but be amazed. You're instantly aware that you are listening to a deck that is totally top tier; everything about the package's performance is of an extremely high order, with nothing to fault and almost everything to love. Scritti Politti's *The*

Word Girl is a whimsical eighties pop song that isn't particularly well recorded, but the way the SME handles it is impressive. It has a wide, spacious and three-dimensional soundstage with accurate image location, a fulsome tonality with more guts than you've a right to expect for the era, plus a relentlessly propulsive musicality. Above all, though, is the sense of polish and precision to the whole production, which makes me want to keep on listening all night long.

Elements of the mix sound so secure they could've been nailed to the wall

Serious vinyl spinners always do soundstaging well, and this new SME turntable package duly delivers the goods. The Scritti Politti track comes right out of the speakers to meet me, filling the room with a supremely confident and stable sound, acting as if it owns my listening room and I am lucky to have been let in to hear it. I've heard rival high-end turntables do slightly better in terms of scale from left to right, but the Synergy shows excellent depth perspective and places instruments with rifle-bolt precision within the soundstage. Individual elements of the mix sound so secure they could have been nailed to the wall.

Moving to Change's *A Lover's Holiday*, I am struck by the sheer smoothness,

sweetness and polish of the package. This is a classic disco track from the seventies with actual acoustic instruments and the SME really brings their timbre to the fore, giving a largely translucent rendition of the record that has just a touch of extra warmth thrown in. Some of this elan is recognisably from the tonearm, which has an exceptionally solid low-end response that underpins the bass drum and bass guitar with more guts than you'd expect. At the same time, it shows great polish in the treble, rendering the hi-hat cymbal work with a delicious slickness that one rarely hears, even from high-end vinyl. All this makes for a powerful, barrel-chested and opulent sound, with an ever so subtle sepia tint for good measure.

Musically, the SME takes the rhythm by the scruff of the neck and delivers it right at you. The Teardrop Explodes' *Reward* is a frenetic early eighties indie-pop stomper, and the Synergy steamrollers it along with super-fast attack transients – doubtless down to the motor unit's fine speed stability and the tonearm's grip – and the very lithe sounding Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti cartridge. It is real foot-tapping stuff, but interestingly the deck remains in complete control at all times. In conjunction with excellent dynamics – it's easy to hear the music's subtle accents as well as track serious level changes – the result is a gripping and highly engrossing sound.

Conclusion

It's very easy to love SME's Synergy; you can spend more on separate deck/arm/cartridge/phono amp combinations, but the jury's out on whether the sonics of this package can be beaten at the price. I love its no-nonsense styling, its physical compactness, the superlative build and its overall sound. If you're lucky enough to be able to afford it, SME's Synergy package is an essential purchase for all types of vinyl fans. **DP**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Supremely open and detailed sound; sheer quality
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: One of the world's finest turntable packages, period
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



FLOORSTANDING
LOUDSPEAKER



Acoustic Energy AE509

AE's flagship 500 series introduces its first carbon drivers, revealing a floorstander that is a real fibre-provider in the process

With its twin custom-designed carbon fibre mid/bass units working together with a bespoke carbon fibre tweeter, the AE509 enjoys several immediate and important benefits. Because the material is half the weight of the company's former aluminium cones, it offers better transient speed and is less power-hungry. Also, because all the drivers use the same carbon fibre weave, they integrate better in the time domain. Finally, because they share the same material, there's tonal consistency to all frequencies. This cohesion is aided and abetted by the natural self-damping that the material has, claims the manufacturer.

This 25mm dome tweeter replaces the heavier aluminium dome used on the AE509's predecessor. It partners

This floorstander sounds great with every track and music type I play

two 125mm drivers with cast aluminium baskets, metal dust caps and a new 35mm voice coil. The speaker is a two-way configuration, but with a midrange-tweeter-mid/bass (MTM) driver layout, with high voltage polypropylene film-wound capacitors and air core inductors used in critical locations in the crossover. The business is done at 560Hz and 3.1kHz, meaning the tweeter handles unusually low frequencies for a design such as this.

The cabinet is 18mm MDF with the company's Resonance Suppression Composite (RSC) damping. Four aluminium spiked feet fit into the base, providing greater stability. There's a choice of white or black piano gloss finishes, and American walnut wood veneer as shown.

Acoustic Energy claims a frequency range of 32Hz to 28kHz (+/-6dB), which is wider than you might expect

for this size of speaker. Nominal impedance is 6ohm and 175W peak power handling is quoted. It's a bass-reflex design, but due to the clever working of the company's slot port – mounted almost at the top of the rear baffle – it doesn't put out too much rearward energy so you can run the speaker surprisingly close to a boundary wall.

Sound quality

Compared with its price rivals, the AE509 actually sounds a little dull. But that's not dull as in masked, veiled and opaque – but rather it isn't as bright or shrill. There's an almost tonal absence of sheen or 'clang' to the sound. Instead, you get to listen into the instruments in the recording, rather than being assaulted by them. It's an eerie sensation that's quite a thing to behold, and very conspicuous. Manix's *Head In The Clouds* can be seriously forward via some speakers. Yet those super-fast hi-hat cymbal runs and rim shots come over as rather silky. There is certainly no crash-bang-wallop. The keyboard sound proves rich and sonorous, but doesn't dazzle and the female vocal samples are smooth and defined yet never shrill.

Move to some high-paced pop with Blondie's *Hanging On The Telephone*, and I'm taken aback by the speed of the music; it comes out at you at dizzying velocity. There's a vim and brio that makes listening quite an event. It's this curious conjunction of tonal grace and transient pace that sets the AE509 apart from the fray.

Put on 4hero's *Give In* and the speaker shows its impressive handling of low frequencies. It goes lower than I expect for a floorstander of this size and tracks right down into the bottom octaves. Yet bass is never overblown or bulbous; it is taut and tight, but slightly understated. A further thumbs up goes to the cabinet and bass port, neither of which are audible; there's no sense of it honking away behind the drive units in an unruly way.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE509

PRICE
£2,300

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
22kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
185 x 1,000 x 270mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm carbon
fibre dome tweeter
• 2x 125mm carbon
fibre mid/bass
drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 456

Stereo imaging is very good. I have heard point-source speakers with coaxial treble/mid drivers do better, yet the AE509 still does a perfectly good job of recreating the recorded acoustic of Simple Minds' *New Gold Dream*. This can be a bit of a dirge through the wrong replay equipment, but this floorstander navigates it well, giving a clear, detailed and open sound with fine location of different instruments and vocals in the mix. I am impressed by the way Jim Kerr's ethereal-sounding voice hovers above and in front of the rest of the effortlessly conveyed venue acoustic, showcasing the AE509's really rather captivating depth perspective.

This floorstander sounds great with pretty much every track and music type I play. The only criticisms one can make are down to the size of the mid/bass drivers; there's a slight sense of compression when you're punching large amounts of watts into them, but you'd really struggle to think this was an issue in most British living rooms. The narrow baffle design – as is the rule these days, it seems – means there isn't quite the effortless ease of loudspeakers with larger diameter drivers. Being a two-way configuration doesn't help here, either – but few options are at this price. All the same, I love the AE509's clean, detailed, fast, adrenaline-fuelled sound, combined with a high degree of refinement and superb sense of sophistication.

Conclusion

Acoustic Energy is on a roll right now and in recent years has successfully simplified its range of models with strong 100, 300 and 500 series loudspeaker lines offering a choice of different standmount and floorstanding options to attract buyers at a variety of price points. The AE509 is a seriously worthy flagship and as such should be placed high on any audition wish list. **DP**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sonic speed and excitement; build quality and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** One of the best mid-priced floorstanding loudspeakers around

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Bowers & Wilkins 603

As the 600 Series says goodbye to Kevlar and ushers in shiny new Continuum tech, it's time to check out the flagship model

Sitting at the top of the entry-level 600 Series, the 603 is an awful lot of well-engineered, smartly dressed, bang-up-to-date floorstander for the money. Let's begin at the top with the 25mm decoupled Double Dome aluminium tweeter. At first glance it looks like a direct lift from the majority of models in the 700 Series family. Up to a point, it is. The Double Dome aspect is the same, but the aluminium dome lacks the 700 Series' rigidity-enhancing carbon coating and a housing that incorporates heat-sinking behind the dome. That said, it uses an upgraded neodymium magnet and wears the new grille mesh from the 700 Series.

The 150mm Continuum FST cone works solely in the midband. B&W is still secretive about the Continuum's

The presentation is beguilingly natural and coherent with stunning depth

exact composition, but its chief virtue is that it's designed to break up in a specific, controlled way and, even more importantly, to return to its normal state as fast as possible. This means there's less distortion, or 'ringing', in the time domain.

Aided by B&W's sizeable, dimpled 'Flowport' rear-firing reflex port are a pair of 165mm bass drivers working in parallel. They have paper/Kevlar cones and are said to reach down to 29Hz (-6dB). B&W claims the tweeter is good for 33kHz (-6dB); bandwidth more often associated with speakers costing twice the price of the 603.

Despite its plain – a kind of durable, eggshell matt white wrap as supplied (black is also available) – the 603 is stabilised by a weighty bolt-on plinth (not shown) that extends its footprint in all directions and shrugs off accidental nudges with impunity. As is increasingly the norm, the grilles

are magnetically attached, with flush-fitting driver trims neatly concealing the fixing bolts.

Sound quality

After auditioning the 603 with a few amps, both pre/power and integrated, Hegel's H90 (HFC 427) seems to offer the best balance of grace and grip for driving my larger listening room to anti-social levels, though it appreciates the extra raw grunt and drive of ATC's CA2/P1 combo (HFC 397). Cambridge Audio's CXC CD transport (HFC 401) and Chord Electronics' Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) are joined by an Elipson Omega 100 Carbon Black turntable with a Rega Fono mk 2 phono stage.

First up, Chaka Khan's *Like Sugar* from *Hello Happiness* is treated to the ATC power amp's volume, allowing the 603 to create a remarkable fusion of detail and disco that doesn't undersell either. It's not a particularly complex track, but it is a little bright, right in your face and most definitely rhythm driven. The 603 doesn't mess with any of this, propelling the production into the room full force, grabbing the groove like an ice hook and pounding out the synth bass line with visceral intent. You could argue that this is hardly a revelation given its size, weight and driver count, but there's an inner strength at work here that makes things so clean, controlled and well resolved that Khan's efforts to keep her soaring pipes ahead and above the electronic maelstrom are majestic, masterly and nuanced rather than just another competing sonic strand in the mix. The bottom line is the 603 has compelling clarity, grip, dynamics and enormous musical insight.

For Prefab Sprout's remastered reissue of *I Trawl The Megahertz*, the Hegel amp gets a go and I'm not disappointed. The 22-minute title track that opens the album combines dreamy, lilting orchestrations with smoky, sax-led jazzy interludes and a heartbreaking female narration dealing with divorce and isolation. The Hegel's well documented excellence in

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins
603

PRICE
£1,250

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
24kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
190 x 985 x 340mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm
decoupled
double dome
aluminium tweeter
• 1x 150mm
Continuum cone
FST midrange driver
• 2x 165mm
paper/Kevlar
cone bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowers-wilkins.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 448

the areas of detail resolution and natural tonality couldn't be clearer via the 603's brilliantly transparent midband and each element keeps me glued to the sofa, all but mesmerised.

A clean, well-upholstered production like Shawn Mendes' *Lost In Japan* is delivered with clarity, verve and supple, agile bass that's rhythmically lucid and surefooted. The 603 keys into the material enthusiastically yet with a deft touch and considerable discrimination. There's no mush or sense of hyped euphony and the soundstage is impressively deep and stable with pin-sharp imaging. Without resorting to artificial midrange emphasis and treble lift to enhance presence and sparkle, the presentation is beguilingly natural and coherent with a solid, rhythmic impetus, spacious soundstaging and stunning image solidity and depth.

Conclusion

It doesn't matter what I play, here's a speaker with the power, bandwidth and bass heft to do full-scale justice to Metallica, Muse and Motörhead, the uncoloured, low-distortion transparency and 3D imaging to conjure the ambience and atmosphere of the most intimate gig and a tonal palette that's believable rather than manipulative. Given the attentions of a muscular amp, there's enough headroom to whip up a torrent of decibels and yet, in the teeth of the sonic storm seem as if it's not trying. And all underpinned by that appealingly 'architectural' bass performance, which lends the presentation so much presence and life. The 603 has an easy, unstrained quality that lets the music flow on its own terms. And more than that, with the kind of dynamic expression and discrimination that truly opens music up and is seldom experienced at this price point. This floorstander is a complete loudspeaker – exceptional value and warmly recommended. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Scale and authority; speed and transparency; bass

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Functional rather than fancy finish

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: If you've room for a big floorstander that does it all, it's doubtful you'll find better for the money

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



DALI Oberon 7

Neatly positioned at the top of the front baffle of the Oberon 7 is DALI's 29mm ultra-lightweight soft-dome tweeter. The company claims it is less than half the average weight of most dome tweeters at this price point. Ferro-fluid cooling is used, and the top of the pole piece has damping to reduce acoustic reflections. The speaker is a classic two-way design, handing over the baton at 2.3kHz to the mid/bass units.

As per company tradition, these sport wood fibre cones, which are essentially fine grain paper pulp, reinforced with wood fibres. The voice coil is a four-layer design with light copper-clad wire sporting an aluminium core and a thin-walled outer copper tube to reduce weight. The pole piece is said to be a unique combination of iron and SMC, minimising mechanical distortion,

and there's an SMC disc atop the iron pole piece, claimed to lower third-order harmonic distortion. The result is a quoted frequency response of 36Hz to 26kHz with 88.5dB sensitivity, 6ohm nominal impedance and power handling said to be 30W to 180W.

Sound quality

From the off, it's immediately obvious this is an open-sounding design with a subtly warm tone, smooth integration of drive units, lots of detail and a deep, articulate bass. Cue up Steely Dan's *Home At Last* and the speaker gives a large and fulsome sound that projects the stereo image well out of the box, pushing beyond the physical limitations of its cabinets with a decent amount of stage depth.

But it's the tonality that's really special for the price. It might not offer the natural translucency of more expensive designs, but it is really

quite detailed, and better still, couth. Steely Dan's Donald Fagen has a slightly nasal voice that's a little thin, so it can sound hard through budget speakers. Not so here. The Oberon 7 proves to have a very even tonality. It is largely seamless from bottom to top, with just the slightest hint of boxy coloration lower down. This is far from intrusive and in some ways quite euphonic, adding a little extra 'fillip' to the upper bass, which reinforces the sense of this being a large-sounding speaker.

New Atlantic's *I Know* – with its big bass transients and thick swathes of synthesisers in the midband – proves a pleasure. Instead of getting bogged down in the bass, the DALI puts up a display of control and constrained power. It is pacy and full of life, with real snap to hi-hats and rim shots, and the overall sense is of the singer syncopating well with the music. There is a touch of time-smearing in the bass, but not enough to distract from a highly enjoyable performance.

Imaging is good, but not great. With New Order's *Regret* it conveys the detail in the mix, but you don't get the pin-point 'etched into space' sort of feel to the way it recreates the recorded acoustic. Instead the Oberon 7 creates a large wall of sound and prefers to go for scale rather than ultimate accuracy.

It can shift serious amounts of air, yet unlike others that are designed to pull off this sort of trick – to give you a lot of 'sound per pound' – it has serious strength in depth. There are no rough edges and it's pretty respectable in so many ways.

Conclusion

The Oberon 7 might lack the focus and detail of more expensive rivals, but in other respects it is way better than it has any right to be at the price meaning it will appeal to those cash-strapped audiophiles in search of some serious bang for their buck. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI Oberon 7

PRICE
£900

ORIGIN
Denmark/China

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
14.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 1,015 x
340mm

FEATURES
• 1x 29mm tweeter
• 1x 178mm
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88.5dB/1W/1m
(6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
DALI UK

TELEPHONE
0845 6443537

WEBSITE
dali-speakers.com

REVIEWED
HFC 444

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Highly enjoyable sound; deep, extended bass frequencies

DISLIKE: Looks are a bit plain; speaker grille fixings

WE SAY: Talented budget floorstander with impressive big sound

OVERALL

★★★★★

DALI Oberon 5

A MORE MODEST proposition than DALI's traditional fare, the Oberon 5 is a simple two-way design. Its brace of 130mm mid/bass drivers use the company's proprietary wood fibre/paper-pulp cone tech and share the work load with a larger than usual 29mm soft-dome tweeter. With a claimed sensitivity of 88dB/1W/1m and a nominal impedance of 6ohm, it is a friendly enough load that shouldn't require much muscle to drive a typical living room to reasonable levels. With its wide-dispersion tweeter, DALI says the Oberon 5 doesn't need any toe-in, but I find a tiny amount works best in my room.

Sound quality

Lizz Wright's *Seems I'm Never Tired Of Lovin' You* is warm and intimate, the plaintive and tender vocals floating over an achingly tasteful

arrangement. The Oberon 5's clear and resolute midband leaves you in no doubt this is a fabulously subtle and nuanced ensemble performance and its realistic handling of double bass is remarkable for its size. About half way through, the Atlanta church choir joins with soaring gospel zeal, in a less than flattering acoustic. The DALI makes a good fist of separation and layering with microdynamics capturing texture and body and saving the choir from sounding papery.

Perhaps the most likable thing about the Oberon 5 is the way it responds to whatever you play. It seems to be completely genre agnostic, ripping through Muse's *Propaganda* with unalloyed glee and drive yet dialling back to the deftest of touches for Diana Krall's *Feels Like Home* duet with Bryan Adams, its powers of discrimination resolving distinct identities when they harmonise. **DV**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI Oberon 5
PRICE
£700
TELEPHONE
0845 6443537
WEBSITE
dali-speakers.com
REVIEWED
HFC 447

OUR VERDICT



Mission QX-3

IF MISSION'S TUBBY QX-2 standmount (HFC 436) proved that it's hip to be square, its slimline sibling affects a more conventional elegance and makes those rigidity-boosting aluminium end caps look better still.

Its proportions are essentially those of the QX-1 made long with an extra mid/bass driver, two rear-firing bass ports and more cabinet volume to address much wider bandwidth.

The 135mm main drivers adopt Mission's DiaDrive cone system, which uses an oversized magnet to improve sensitivity. The 38mm ring-dome tweeter uses a woven, textile material formed in a double ring arrangement.

Sound quality

The QX-3 sounds tonally smooth and warm yet exactly clear, incisive and dynamic. And down in the basement it moves plenty of air.

Its presentation isn't as immediately alluring as the DALI (above), but it doesn't take long for its charms to connect. Its performance is rich and dark and while not as eager to please as the Oberon 5, it paints a bigger and more expansive sonic picture.

The sound is supple and organic – qualities that flesh out Diana Krall's *Wallflower* – and although it isn't as adroit as the Oberon 5 at keeping Krall's vocal distinct, the emotions seem more heartfelt. It lends Muse's *Simulation Theory Propaganda* plenty of mass and momentum, while Lump's *Late To The Flight* acquires a weightier presence and greater refinement, the layered synth and delicate avian flutes providing a plumper cushion for Laura Marling's close-miked vocal.

Overall the QX-3 sounds extremely comfortable and confident, while delivering impressively realistic slam and bass extension. **DV**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mission QX-3
PRICE
£700
TELEPHONE
01279 822800
WEBSITE
mission.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 447

OUR VERDICT



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Elipson Prestige Facet 34F

Taking its name from the unusual 'multi-faceted' trim that surrounds each drive unit, the Prestige Facet 34F is a three-way, five-driver design with treble duties handled by a 25mm silk-dome tweeter with aluminium face plate and a large magnet assembly to give good sensitivity. The tweeter and twin 178mm midrange drivers are positioned in a D'Appolito configuration and the coated paper cone with rubber surround mid drivers employ aluminium phase plugs, which claim to increase the frequency range to make it easier to handover to the tweeter.

The two meaty 254mm bass units – again with coated paper cones and rubber surrounds – use concave dust caps that match the cone profile and are loaded by twin rear-facing reflex ports. Also on the back is a custom-designed circular connection panel

with silver-plated bi-wireable binding posts. The driver crossover circuitry incorporates high-quality components, including metal film resistors, low-resistance inductors and metal film capacitors.

Sound quality

The Facet 34F has bass. Loads of it, in fact, and it's magnificent. I think my vision almost goes fuzzy when Jazzanova's *Takes You Back* hit its lowest notes, and all of this with the volume control on my amplifier barely a third of the way round. If the loudspeaker you require is a big, sensitive, thunderous party animal, then look no further; this one comprehensively ticks all the boxes.

After some serious experimentation, I find that positioning is absolutely critical if you are not to end up with an unpleasant mid-to-low bass boom ruining things. Despite the design

leaning more to natural bass talent, it's surprisingly couth at the low end. We've all heard loudspeakers that try to squeeze the last amount of bass quantity from their cabinets, sacrificing quality in the process, but the Facet 34F delivers the best of both worlds. When playing Bonnie Raitt and Delbert McClinton's *Good Man, Good Woman* the kick drum strikes can be felt squarely in the chest, while the intricate bass guitar that hangs behind is clean and easy to follow.

Across the midband, it continues to impress with Tori Amos appearing to be at the other end of the listening room performing *Pretty Good Year* as every piano key strike leaps out at me with the sort of force I would normally expect from a live instrument.

Naturally the Facet 34F's soundstage is as large as might be expected from a loudspeaker boasting such hefty proportions, but again there is real precision within. Instruments occupy their own defined space and vocalists stand clear and project perfectly out into the room. It doesn't throw images quite as wide as some rivals, but certainly fills the space between, behind and in front so marvellously, it really doesn't matter.

The top end is sweet and insightful, but without any sense of hardness to ruin the whole delicate balance. The guitar string plucks from Nickel Creek's *Reasons Why* are beautifully defined and the subtle percussion effects backing Aaron Neville on *Everybody Plays The Fool* are present, correct and easy to distinguish.

Conclusion

There's a lot to enjoy about the Prestige Facet 34F. It might need a big area to breathe and require careful positioning so as not to over drive the room at particular frequencies, but get this right and it is a truly capable loudspeaker that can whisper subtly or rearrange your internal organs if the mood demands. **AS**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Elipson Prestige Facet 34F

PRICE
£2,500

ORIGIN
France/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
44.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
355 x 1,211 x 420mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm soft dome tweeter
• 2x 178mm midrange drivers
• 2x 254mm bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity: 94dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Avoke Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01628 857958

WEBSITE
elipson.com

REVIEWED
HFC 453

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Plenty of good quality bass; imaging and treble detail

DISLIKE: Needs a big room and careful placement

WE SAY: Muscular and dynamic sound with a surprisingly gentle touch, too



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Fyne Audio F702

Pretty big by UK standards, most listening rooms will look a lot smaller with the F702 in place. The three drive units are key to its sound, not just in what they are but how they are arranged. The lion's share of the work is done by the 200mm IsoFlare point-source driver; a coaxial treble and mid/bass unit that works with a 200mm multi-fibre bass driver. The 2.5-way system crosses over at 1.7kHz and 250Hz respectively, using a passive low loss crossover with second order low pass and first order high pass filtering.

The upper IsoFlare has at its heart a 25mm magnesium dome compression tweeter with neodymium magnet system and a multi-fibre mid/bass cone with a special FyneFlute surround. This specially designed roll surround is oriented to stop energy being reflected back down the cone and thus distorting

the sound. The F702's large cabinet has two cavities inside to separate the main drive units; the bass unit uses the company's own BassTrax Tractrix diffuser with a downward-firing port.

Sound quality

The most obvious and impressive aspect of its sound is its excellent soundstaging, which takes the music right out of the box. Nick Drake's *Hazey Jane II* highlights this all too clearly; this can be underwhelming due to its tonal dryness and opaque early seventies analogue recording quality. Yet as the F702 gets into its stride, you can hear it dissolve out of the cabinets. The soundstage grows in size, opening up to reveal all the strands of the mix are very accurately located, but most impressive are the vocals, hovering between the speakers. The effect is mesmeric, and the magic of a well-done point-source design.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fyne Audio F702

PRICE
£6,000

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
30.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
384 x 1,111 x 440mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm IsoFlare
magnesium
dome tweeter
• 1x 200mm
IsoFlare multi-fibre
mid/bass driver
• 1x 200mm
IsoFlare multi-fibre
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
92dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Fyne Audio

TELEPHONE
0141 4284008

WEBSITE
fyneaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 450

The second most obvious facet of the F702 is its tonal balance. This is very even and extended. Duran Duran's *Lonely In Your Nightmare* can sound thin and tinselly on lesser loudspeakers, but here is a resolutely even and balanced rendition, making it very clear this is a wideband design. No excuses are needed for the deep, extended bass response; it goes down very low and yet isn't in the least bit lumpy. It handles all recordings with an innate sense of balance, with no artificial plateaus here or there to give things an extra fillip; all that extra cabinet volume should be there to make the bass deeper, not louder.

At the other end of the frequency range, the tweeter does a good – if not quite stellar – job. The fast hit ride cymbals on the Duran Duran track arrive right on time and sound smoother and silkier than many metal dome tweeters.

Sunset by Frederick Delius with Julian Lloyd Webber and Jiaxin Cheng on cello positively blossoms. Alongside the aforementioned vast soundstaging and image precision, it's very gratifying to hear so much detail. This isn't an ultra-forensic speaker – some others dig deeper – but it's still highly informative about, for example, the textural quality of the cellos. The drive units are obviously of very high quality and mate up well to one another; at the same time, there's very little to be heard from the cabinet either.

Conclusion

With true high-end performance – especially in its imaging and soundstaging – Fyne Audio's F702 is an excellent large loudspeaker. It ticks a good deal of important boxes while having very few flaws and when you consider that in the great pantheon of high-end floorstanders it isn't actually particularly expensive at all, it begins to look an even more impressive proposition. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Soundstaging; imaging; insight; balance; bass

DISLIKE: Even handedness won't please all

WE SAY: Hugely capable, excellent value high-end floorstander



NOVAFIDELITY

HA500H



Hybrid Preamplifier, Headphone Amplifier & DAC



The HA500H is a premium hybrid preamplifier with multiple inputs and dual ES9018K2M DAC chips, featuring a powerful, highly specified headphone amplifier.

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Kerr Acoustic K320

Properly done, transmission line speakers give a faster, deeper bass for a given cabinet size and lower distortion, too. The reason that TLs aren't as popular as reflex designs is they're harder to get right, costlier to build and tend to be less efficient.

The K320 – £3,700 in satin finish, £4,000 in high gloss (pictured) – features a 165mm Scanspeak 18W/4531G01 mid/bass driver with a wood-fibre cone and a modified 60mm true-ribbon Fountek Neo X 2.0 tweeter with a very low 0.027g diaphragm mass. These are laced together at 1.95kHz with a six-element, second order (12dB/octave) crossover with selected components, hand soldered using point-to-point wiring. Unique air-core inductors are used, along with polypropylene film capacitors and carbon film resistors. Claimed frequency response is 24Hz

to 45kHz, sensitivity 90dB and nominal impedance 6ohm. Around the back is a pair of 4mm pure copper binding posts and a treble level cut switch.

Sound quality

Rush's *The Camera Eye* is a torture track for any loudspeaker, with its three-dimensional soundstage, amazingly fast and propulsive bass guitar work and firecracker drums. The K320 loves it, showing just how impressive a well-done transmission line design can sound. The bottom end is so tight and taut that you can hear how Geddy Lee's bass guitar sounds just as percussive as the drum kit. The bottom end is deep and strong, yet eerily well controlled.

At the other end of the frequency band, the ribbon tweeter delivers a delicately etched performance that's full of filigree detail. The K320 delivers the beautiful hi-hat cymbal

work of Supertramp's *Bloody Well Right* perfectly, letting high frequencies shimmer with a lovely metallic sheen without becoming tonally harsh or texturally coarse.

It's clear how the K320 reaps the benefit of that high-quality tweeter, showing a delicacy and vibrancy that's often lost by clumsy fabric domes, and/or lesser mid/bass units. Things are pleasingly neutral, if not quite translucent. *Wrapped Around Your Finger* by The Police comes across in a most impressive light. You can peer right into the mix and get a great feel for the recorded acoustic. Things are marked out in space with great accuracy, and the stereo image is satisfying wide.

But what absolutely defines this design is its combination of speed and smoothness. The super-light tweeter, allied to its ultra-tight bass and highly inert midband, make it great fun with fast, propulsive music. Kraftwerk's *Die Roboter* sounds smooth and sophisticated yet hugely engaging. The speaker's transient speed is excellent, and every type of music it touches sounds highly involving, vibrant and alive. There's no sense of the treble being ahead of the bass or of either driver interfering with the other to cloud the midband. Instead, it presents a cohesive single object in space and time.

Given the price, it is almost churlish to criticise, but the K320 doesn't quite have the sense of effortlessness that you get from larger three-way high-end designs as it is not immune to the laws of physics.

Conclusion

As one of the most impressive upmarket floorstanders I've heard in a long time, the K320 is a great advert for transmission line loudspeaker designs. Just remember to partner it with a muscular solid-state amplifier and decent source to enable it to deliver its very best. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Kerr Acoustic K320

PRICE
From £3,700

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
25kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
195 x 1,020 x 395mm

FEATURES
• 1x 60mm true
ribbon tweeter
• 1x 165mm
Scanspeak
wood-fibre
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Kerr Acoustic

TELEPHONE
07884 493425

WEBSITE
kerracoustic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 446

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Deep, taut bass; detailed, fast and clean sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Needs a muscle amp to give its very best

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Brilliant sounding mid-price floorstander

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

MUSICAL FIDELITY



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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



KLH Kendall

American brand KLH's take on the floorstander is virtually identical to Bowers & Wilkins' 603 (p24), with nigh on the same size and weight, shooting for the same lofty sonic goals and costing only slightly more. It's big and heavy enough to require careful extraction from its sturdy packaging but at least the process showcases the speaker's solid build and tidy real-wood veneer finish, which is a little more deluxe than the aforementioned B&W's. When it comes to finishes you get to choose between black oak or American walnut as reviewed here.

The Kendall is a three-way, bass reflex design (two rear-firing ports) totting two 165mm bass drivers, a 133mm midrange driver and a 25mm anodised aluminium dome tweeter with a brushed aluminium 'linear response' faceplate. The main drivers

use woven Kevlar cones and butyl rubber surrounds in a power-coated diecast aluminium chassis, the motor systems featuring oversized magnets. KLH mentions the 'braided tinsel' internal cabling, custom-made, multi-element crossovers and high-quality components.

Sound quality

Rather aptly, first up is American soul legend PP Arnold's album *The New Adventures Of PP Arnold*. Straight away, musical connection is strong with a lively, open midband and smooth, well-extended and, when required, weighty and propulsive bass. The big KLH is an impressively articulate speaker, too, easily resolving nuances of phrasing and tempo tweaks that give Arnold's performance believability.

The brilliant opener, *Baby Blue*, has a sonorous period swagger that

the Kendall captures beautifully, preserving the deftly struck balance between PP's golden pipes and the irrepressible verve of the brass section. Free from grain and coarseness, detail isn't presented in flashing, neon-lit capitals but as integral – the lubricant that makes the music mesh – and flows without sounding artfully hyped. There's a likeable sense of assurance and authority that's smooth and tuneful and involves you with the music in a very physical way.

Among the handful of covers, the treatment of the simply sung *I'm A Dreamer* infuses a weighty, dark, soulful angst and dense orchestral backdrop that works amazingly well. Again, the Kendall is particularly adept at marshalling the competing strands into a cohesive whole in which the emotional dynamic ebbs and flows unhindered and with its fair share of scalp-tingling moments.

The B&W 603 sounds a touch more explicit and animated with this material, giving a greater sense of transparency through the midband and treble. The Kendall, on the other hand, has a richer balance and bass that, while sounding a little less obvious, is deliciously smooth, even, agile and extended. Marcus Miller's electric bass guitar on *The Sun Don't Shine* is simply stunning, not just for the remarkable leading-edge definition but the way it conveys the persuasive, percussive weight and expressive note shaping.

Conclusion

If KLH's plan is to take on a host of well-loved brands, this is the way to do it. The Kendall is an exciting example of a floorstander with impressive bandwidth, offering outstanding sound for the money in a package that looks smart and is well made. There are gifted rivals, some of which are a little prettier, but the talented KLH has a lot going for it. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
KLH Kendall

PRICE
£1,400

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
22kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
197 x 1,016 x 375mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm
anodised aluminium
dome tweeter
• 1x 133mm Kevlar
midrange driver
• 2x 165mm Kevlar
weave bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
96dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
TBM Solution
TELEPHONE
+35 319010491

WEBSITE
klhaudio.eu

REVIEWED
HFC 454

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Great balance of sonic virtues; musical to the core

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Not exactly a cutting-edge aesthetic

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WESAY: Welcome back KLH, the Kendall is a fine floorstander that does you proud

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Monitor Audio Gold 300

MA's Gold series combines luxury with fine performance, but the flagship floorstander takes things to the next level

Monitor Audio's s range-topping, three-way Gold 300 floorstander sits one tier below the company's flagship Platinum II lineup. Given what we know about MA's *modus operandi*, the likelihood of a slow-burning, plumb-line neutral presentation seems as remote as the possibility of the brand entertaining a plain, dourly functional aesthetic.

Now in its fifth generation, the new Gold lineup has slimmed down to the £1,400 Gold 100 standmount, £1,100 Gold C250 centre speaker, £1,700 Gold FX bi-pole/di-pole surround, £2,100 Gold W12 subwoofer and two floorstanders. The Gold 300 on test here is joined by the shorter, slimmer £2,900 Gold 200, which has smaller main drivers, less internal volume, doesn't go quite as low in the bass and

The benefits the 300 brings to openness, clarity and harmonic structure are special

is a little less sensitive, but like the 300, is a three-way configuration.

Gold's remit is to deliver: "a peerless combination of aesthetic beauty, flawless construction and exquisite sound". It isn't quite Monitor Audio's best game, but packs in plenty of trickle-down driver tech from the company's premium Platinum II. It deploys a brace of 203mm Rigid Diaphragm Technology (RDT II) mid/bass drivers wired in series and working in conjunction with the airflow-smoothing, rear-facing twin HiVe II bass reflex ports, a pairing that helps the Gold 300 go seriously deep (claiming down to 30Hz at -6dB) and is said to benefit both bass tautness and transient response.

Each driver sandwiches a thin C-CAM, nomex honeycomb core and a woven carbon fibre back skin to form a cone that's rigid and stiff yet light. Dedicated to the midrange is

a dinky 64mm C-CAM driver that's fast and responsive enough to team seamlessly with the Micro Pleated Diaphragm (MPD) ribbon-style tweeter lifted from the Platinum II – claimed to have a 50kHz -6dB frequency ceiling – and, because it doesn't suffer the kind of audible range break up that afflicts dome tweeters, marries smoothness and attack in a more convincing fashion.

With its magnetically attached grille removed, the Gold 300 is a blend of conspicuous hi-tech and sumptuous luxury and finished to such a high standard (in satin white, piano black as supplied, ebony or walnut), makers of significantly pricier high-end fare must wonder how on earth Monitor Audio does it. With its anodised metal outrigger feet bolted on, the speaker feels fabulously solid, too. Crossover components include bespoke polypropylene film capacitors, air-core and low-loss laminated steel-core inductors, while internal cabling is silver-plated OFC copper.

Sound quality

With some speakers, you can have a reasonable stab at how they'll sound from the way they look. My guess is that for the Gold 300, the connection isn't incidental. Large, clean and immaculately rendered are the thoughts that begin to surface, and first impressions certainly seem to concur. Standing in for the £3,500 Falcon Studio 30 three-way floorstander (HFC 442) that boasts a distinctly relaxed and natural vein in my larger listening room, it promises to be intriguing.

The sonic differences between the Studio 30 and Gold 300 are by no means subtle and when I slip Madonna's *Madame X* into the CD tray even Darcy the cat, usually content to let Madge's music wash over her, looks startled. It could have something to do with the amount of deep, weighty synth bass the Gold 300 is shifting on *Dark Ballet*, a sprawling, wreckage of a song that, half way in has a heavily vocodered Madonna singing barely

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio
Gold 300

PRICE
£4,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
30.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
328 x 1,047 x 418mm

FEATURES
• 1x MPD transducer
• 1x 64mm C-CAM
midrange driver
• 2x 203mm RDT II
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01268 740580

WEBSITE
monitoraudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 453

decipherable lyrics to the main melody of the *Nutcracker Suite*. The production delivers an eclectic mix of electronic and acoustic instrumental textures that the Gold 300 unpicks easily, presenting each strand with such focused precision and hear-through transparency it immediately makes you want to mine your music collection for more unrealised highs.

It quickly becomes clear that the Gold 300 possesses formidable hi-fi smarts. The ribbon tweeter's extension, purity, speed and absence of audible break-up modes makes most dome types sound 'obvious'. The benefits it brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure are special. The midband is beautifully voiced and exquisitely clean with vanishingly low colouration and cabinet contribution. Driver integration is utterly seamless. When Mavis Staples sings *Change*, it isn't just the earthy timbre and heartfelt expression in her voice that thrills, but the sense of a physical presence that connects so powerfully. The spare, raw guitar, bass and drums bristle with attitude and give things a perfectly realised retro, classic feel. And it's all underpinned by that deep, rock-solid bass, a rhythmic fluency that keeps everything on track and a grasp of dynamic subtleties, as well as the big swings, that are commendable for a large floorstander. Moreover, with the right recordings, superb imaging dissolves the enclosure into a deep and expansive soundstage.

Conclusion

If a speaker like the Falcon Acoustics Studio 30's presentation is too laid back for you, check out the Gold 300. With vividly produced material its performance can verge on the 'hyper real'. But, for the most part, it's a consummate crowd pleaser that, arguably more than any rival at the price, sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Fabulous build and finish; detailed and transparent sound; deep powerful bass

DISLIKE: Not always the most relaxing listen

WESAY: The crystal-clear Monitor Audio sound with true scale and weight. A winning combination

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Ophidian P3 Evolution

Ophidian is quickly building a reputation for knockout sonics, and this floorstanding loudspeaker perfectly illustrates why

First launched back in 2016 as the P3 Prophet, this speaker was initially hampered by driver quality control niggles. Following a switch of supplier and a few aesthetic tweaks, the tall Ophidian tower's second coming, as the £5,000 P3 Evolution, wowed many who heard it at The Bristol Hi-Fi Show earlier in 2019 and I've had the pleasure of spending a month listening to it at home.

My first instinct is to take a peek behind the full-length grille. It's something of an eyebrow raiser. Mixing metal and non-metal driver diaphragms is certainly a familiar approach if the designer has elected not to go the all-metal, Monitor Audio-style, route. But it's usually the tweeter that's shiny, with the midrange and bass drivers adopting complimentary materials.

Bass gives you a hug, midband is sexy as hell and the treble never makes a scene

With the P3 Evolution, however, Ophidian's Gareth James has instead opted for three relatively small (150mm) aluminium-coned drivers to cover the bass frequencies. These are made by SEAS of Norway and feature large magnets with low-loss rubber surrounds and work in series, leaving the custom-built 50mm fabric dome, which operates in its own sealed enclosure, to do what should be a spectacular number on the midrange before handing over to the 27mm Sonotex tweeter, which uses a coated fabric dome. The five drivers' workloads are divided up three ways by a Mundorf crossover and are mounted on a very substantial 25mm-thick baffle itself decoupled from the main enclosure by a flexible gasket, which helps isolate vibrations that would otherwise pass directly into the cabinet panels. These are

fashioned from plywood), which is lighter and stronger than MDF for a given thickness and – as it's made-up of glued slices – has far superior self-damping properties.

The enclosure's internal architecture also incorporates Ophidian's Aeroflex bass loading topology – essentially a hybrid of transmission line and conventional reflex porting. Its job is to keep the drivers fully loaded until they hit their natural useful excursion limits. James says that most reflex systems 'unload' the drivers once the port velocities reach a certain point, precipitating a lack of cone control and the onset of port 'chuffing'. James contends that Aeroflex is a way of getting around this without going to a full transmission line, which he says has its own drawbacks. The system is built directly into the cabinet with additional panels that act as both the port system (which vents at the top of the rear baffle) and bracing to bolster the enclosure's rigidity. A modest amount of soft damping material is used to absorb internal resonances and reflections, but not so much as to impede the critical airflow that allows the port system to function properly.

Properly weighty at close to 30kg, each speaker has a stubby pillar at its base that puts a little air between it and the adjoining plinth. Although limited to a choice of walnut or, as supplied, light oak, the finish is as classy as you'd hope for £5,000 and the single binding posts are nicely engineered, too.

Sound quality

Over an extended listening period of some weeks, I try the P3 Evolution with both Hegel's H90 integrated amplifier reviewed in *HFC* 427 (only 60W a side, but a stiff power supply and high damping factor) and my resident ATC CA2 Mk2/P1 pre/power reviewed in *HFC* 397 (150W and terrific bass region grip). My usual Cambridge Audio CXC CD transport (*HFC* 401) and Chord Hugo 2 DAC (*HFC* 428) share front-end duties

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ophidian
P3 Evolution

PRICE
£5,000

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
27kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
192 x 1,024 x 315mm

FEATURES
• 1x 27mm fabric-
dome tweeter
• 1x 50mm
fabric-dome
midrange driver
• 3x 150mm
aluminium-cone
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Ophidian Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0151 6325180

WEBSITE
ophidian.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 451

along with an Elipson Omega 100 Carbon Black turntable.

Given the Ophidian's potential for projecting an expansive soundstage and deep, powerful bass, I'm amazed how well the Hegel copes, though at higher volumes it struggles to contain the low-frequency energy generated by the seismic synth sweeps on Grace Jones' *Slave To The Rhythm*. It takes the extra power and grip of the ATC combo to appreciate just how well the P3 executes this ultimate bass extension trial of strength and I can imagine the big speaker's true colours will continue to be revealed with yet more power and expense. The bass gives you a huge hug, the midband is sexy as hell and the treble never makes a scene.

Play something densely layered with lots going on – say, *12 Little Spells* from jazz multi-instrumentalist Esperanza Spalding's album of the same name – and you're immediately swept along by the dynamic flow and rhythmic snap rather than getting snagged on incidental detail. The detail is all there, but it's supplicant to the musical whole and not distractingly showcased for the sake of it. You get it all, but in a way that sounds unforced and natural. Surely the sealed enclosure midrange dome plays a crucial role here.

The speaker's handling of the slower-burning complexities on Lambchop's *This (Is What I Wanted to Tell You)* is equally impressive. Again, it's the balance that tells, and the feeling of having oodles of power in reserve. As well as the mood, you get the big picture in a fashion so natural and coherent you almost feel you're breathing the same air.

Conclusion

The Ophidian P3 Evolution is a stunningly talented floorstander with abilities that make its £5k price seem a snip. Even if your budget is twice the size, don't reach for the plastic until you've given it a listen. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Engaging sound quality; bass extension and warmth; finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Driver array looks slightly odd

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** It might not have corporate muscle behind it, but the P3 Evolution takes the fight to the high-end's big hitters

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Spendor D7.2

This updated floorstander looks as sober as the original D series. But don't be fooled, it's a seriously sophisticated performer

As its name suggests, the D7.2 is a reworking of Spendor's D7 medium-sized floorstander (HFC 370), one of just two models in the D line. It's a largish 2.5-way design that's just about the right size for most UK listening rooms; the larger D9.2 (£7,700) may prove too big. It has been heavily reworked since the original, but this amounts to a lot of subtle tweaks rather than a radical revamp. Effectively the design team has gone over the original speaker's weaker points and tweaked them.

The cabinet has been made more rigid with extra bracing and quieter with Spendor Dynamic Damping. The plinths have been redesigned and are now smaller and slimmer, which gives a substantially neater look. The finishes now comprise black ash,

The D7.2 delivers a smooth but tactile rendition of what is being played

cherry, dark walnut, natural oak and satin white as pictured. This is helped by the use of magnetically mounted grilles, meaning no unsightly mounting accoutrements on the front baffle.

The driver complement comprises a mid/bass drive unit with Spendor's EP77 polymer cone, in 180mm guise. Mating to this is a low-frequency unit with a two-part bonded Kevlar composite cone. Both drivers feature cast magnesium alloy chassis, high-efficiency motor systems, optimised electro-dynamic damping, plus new polymer surrounds. Above these two is the company's Linear Pressure Zone tweeter, which is built around a stainless steel front plate that forms a damped acoustic chamber in front of a lightweight woven polyamide diaphragm. A phase-correcting micro foil is fitted to equalise soundwave path lengths across the diaphragm surface and

generates a symmetrical pressure environment on both faces of the tweeter diaphragm so it operates in a balanced linear mode.

I'm not a big fan of ported speaker cabinets as I think they compromise the timing slightly, even if they do bring other benefits. Spendor's 5G Linear flow port is a little different, with an aerodynamically profiled central baffle that creates a tapered twin-venturi port. This manages the airflow along the length of the port, making for low phase shift. The crossover has been tweaked with precision-wound inductors and high-linearity plastic film capacitors. High-quality terminals are fitted around the back of the cabinet; they are recessed, but are a bit fiddly if you use bare-wire connectors.

Sound quality

All the modifications have brought about a subtle but worthwhile improvement to the performance, without throwing out Spendor's trademark civilised sound. What we hear is more of the music and less of the cabinet and drivers. The previous model was already pleasingly neutral and open, but the D7.2 goes much further. The result is a crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's now impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander of this price.

When it comes to tonality, the original wasn't the most transparent but was well integrated from bottom to top and pleasingly warm. The new model doesn't wander far from this path, but sounds fractionally lighter and brighter; there's a little extra sparkle right across the frequency range. The synthesiser on Sade's *The Sweetest Taboo* is more atmospheric, with a sense that you're able to hear the harmonics a little better. There's more space around vocals and a lighter and more spry sound to the cymbals. This is all subtle, but makes for a more lifelike sound – despite remaining smooth and sophisticated.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Spendor D7.2

PRICE
£4,500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
21kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
192 x 950 x 333mm

FEATURES
● 1x 22mm linear
phase hybrid soft
dome tweeter
● 1x 180mm EP77
polymer coned
mid/bass driver
● 1x 180mm Kevlar
composite coned
bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Spendor Audio
Systems Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01323 843474

WEBSITE
spendoraudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 456

One of the reasons for the D7.2 sounding better lit than its predecessor is a reduction in bass overhang. There wasn't that much there before, but it's been taken down a notch; this subtle reduction in upper bass/lower mid 'bloom' means electronic music such as *Living In The Past* by Manix is tauter, tighter and more expressive. The cabinet appears to be storing less energy and so bass notes start and stop faster. This works in the midband too; the reverb tails of hard hit snare drums are more noticeable, with inky black silences between the beats.

With Al Stewart's *Year Of The Cat* the piano is more tactile with a greater sense of an instrument in the room. Added to this is the vibrant way the D7.2 delivers it – giving a smooth but tactile rendition of what is being played. I'm also impressed by how his voice hovers in the air in an ethereal way, and hangs back quite a way – showing this speaker is capable of really fine depth perspective.

The D7.2 is also good at micro dynamics; showcasing delicate piano playing with its tender accenting. This, and its transparent and transient speed, make for an emotionally communicative speaker that impresses on both a hi-fi and an emotional level. The tightly syncopated playing of Donald Byrd's *Street Lady* can be a 'tripwire' for bigger speakers, yet here remains fleet of foot and in control. This isn't a particularly euphoric design, yet it is more engaging than its already decent predecessor.

Conclusion

Some might hanker after a deeper, more extended and powerful bass – but there is the larger D9.2 for that. Others will want a bigger, wider and more visceral sound – for which Spendor can sell you its £19,800 Classic 200Ti flagship. As it stands, the D7.2 strikes the balance and is a modestly sized, highly capable design that deserves to be auditioned. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Svelte yet musical sound; classy styling; build

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Fiddly binding posts

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Highly capable all-rounder that's excellent value for money

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



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Nanoflux-NCF UK



NanoFlux Speaker Cable

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Wharfedale Diamond 11.3

Now in its 11th iteration, the Diamond 11.3 uses a critically braced, fibre-lined multi-layer sandwich of woods of differing density to subdue cabinet colouration and let the drive units work without panel vibrations and resonances joining in. Doubled up for the 11.3 tower's 2.5-way configuration, the 130mm Kevlar weave-coned mid/bass driver features a ribbed basket for extra rigidity and leaves a large open area behind the cone to reduce early reflections while the large ceramic magnet assembly is designed to improve sensitivity and bass control. The 25mm textile dome tweeter uses an over-sized ceramic magnet system with copper cap for flux control and has a vented pole piece and rear chamber, damped with a fibre filling. The Diamond 11.3 is rated at 90dB/1W/1m sensitivity, has a

claimed frequency response reaching down to 44Hz and a recommended maximum amplifier power output from 25W to 150W.

Sound quality

It's clear from the outset that the midband transparency here is a little out of the ordinary for a speaker at this price, meaning vocals are handled with a clarity and tonal accuracy that's striking. There's more bass weight and extension as you'd expect, but it doesn't muddy the mid frequencies.

Take the vivacious energy of Sigrid's voice on *Don't Kill My Vibe*, which has a lovely crystalline purity while the complex, effects-laden production is layered, punchy and remarkably vast considering the modest stature of the speaker cabinet.

Just as importantly, it is responsive, adaptable and so completely unfazed by the challenges that are posed by

Paul Weller's live orchestral outing at the Royal Albert Hall, *Other Aspects*. Its ability to resolve fine detail and spatial information conjures up believable soundscapes that brings the atmosphere of the venue to life.

The presentation carries plenty of presence but not of the hyped kind, detail meshing effortlessly into the larger sonic picture without any 'hot spots' to artificially enliven proceedings. That said, the Diamond 11.3 is unfailingly organised, punctual and tightly focused. It keeps things crisp and orderly, presenting the solid and spacious as a coherent whole with the full spectrum of tonal colours and nicely resolved instrumental timbres.

Simpler material is handled with the same easy authority and impeccable even handedness. Boz Scaggs' nasality doesn't detract from the music on *Runnin' Blue* and Michael McDonald's famously muffled diction, arguably at its least intelligible on *Honest Emotion*, is easier to decipher than it is on some rivals, which has to be a bonus. This combination of clarity and natural-sounding balance is evident time and again and is a very likeable attribute.

Conclusion

This is a compact, well-made speaker that has a deft, insightful touch with any genre and knows where to draw the line to prioritise musical enjoyment over hi-fi histrionics. These are very grown up assets you usually pay a lot more for. It delivers music in a tangible, coherent way with fine drive and rhythmic integrity. And although subtlety is an undoubted strong suit, it isn't achieved at the expense of scale and body. Also exceptional for what is essentially a budget speaker is the way it backs up these qualities with poise and control that's seldom found wanting, even when pushed to high volumes by a muscular power amplifier. In every respect, it exhibits sonic skills that are quite remarkable for the money. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wharfedale
Diamond 11.3

PRICE
£600

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
194 x 875 x 285mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm textile dome tweeter
• 2x 130mm woven Kevlar mid/bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity 90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 452561

WEBSITE
wharfedale.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 449

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Sophisticated, well-balanced sound; build and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing of any real note

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: We rate the standmount members of the new Diamond family, but its smallest floorstander is even better still

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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Acoustic Energy AE300

IN KEEPING WITH AE tradition, the constituent parts of the AE300 include a 25mm aluminium tweeter partnered to a 125mm aluminium mid/bass driver. The modern twist comes in the way it's implemented. The tweeter is set within a waveguide that the company calls Wide Dispersion Technology, to produce a more even dispersion and reduce distortion. Around the back the slot-shaped port is intended to offer the same cross section as a conventional circular port, but with a lower velocity of air exiting it to make it less affected by proximity to walls and with lower port noise.

The walnut wood veneer finish of the review sample is a little orange, but piano gloss white or black are also options. Additional stands are available to match the finish, and cost £200 per pair when purchased bundled together with the AE300.

Sound quality

The claimed 86dB sensitivity into 6ohm means the AE300 needs a little more power than some, but shouldn't be beyond most equivalently priced amps to drive. The tonal balance is well worked too. A Fine Frenzy's *Almost Lover* is crisp and immediate. Vocals have a pleasant sense of energy and the underpinning piano sounds weighty and real. The combination of the two is rendered in a convincingly three-dimensional fashion with a decent overall soundstage.

With Daft Punk's *Lose Yourself To Dance*, the AE300 is on happy ground. It combines its excellent tonality with effortless timing for an engaging listen. The bass response is beautifully judged, balancing depth with a convincing level of speed and cohesion.

It doesn't open out the presentation quite as well as some rivals with The Doors' denser *Break On Through*, but



the same effortless rhythmic ability means the musical message feels like it is being conveyed even if some fine detail isn't. The harder edge to the treble suggests that at high levels it might be a little on the forward side. Only with Kendrick Scott Oracle's more complex *Synchrony* is the AE300 slightly wrong footed. The same slight forwardness it exhibits elsewhere helps with the piano, but the plucked bass feels recessed and a little muddled, failing to settle into the complex rhythm of the track in the manner that some rivals can. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE300

PRICE
£600

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 454

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Amphion Helium510

THE 510 OFFERS a combination of relatively conventional components implemented in a slightly unusual way. The 25mm titanium dome tweeter is set inside a deep waveguide designed to produce a broad stereo image that is not confined to a single 'sweet spot'.

This is partnered with a 130mm doped paper cone mid/bass driver, with a metal grille. The bass output is augmented by a large circular reflex port placed directly behind the driver at the rear and the terminal panel is behind the tweeter at the top of the cabinet. It looks unusual, but is said to improve the flow and integration between port and driver.

The black waveguide and mid/bass grille cover break up the white of the cabinet, while full white, black and walnut wood veneer options are also available and livelier grille colours can be had for £20 per set.

Sound quality

The claimed sensitivity of 86dB into 8ohm feels a little pessimistic, but this should not be considered a tricky speaker to drive. It also largely succeeds in Amphion's aim of avoiding a clear sweet spot. A Fine Frenzy's *Almost Lover* is delivered in a spacious and even fashion that avoids sounding diffuse. The tonality is wholly convincing, with vocals that are rich and smooth while the piano displays excellent decay. The bass extension of Daft Punk's *Lose Yourself To Dance* isn't as deep as some rivals, but it is detailed, fast and superbly integrated with the rest of the frequency response.

This same liveliness sees the Amphion also work well with The Doors' *Break On Through*. At all but the most firmly anti-social volumes, it manages to balance top-end sparkle with enough refinement to avoid



coming across as harsh, while its open and expansive presentation does a good job of helping to place fine detail in a convincing fashion – making the whole performance more believable. It finishes in fine style with Kendrick Scott Oracle's *Synchrony*. The complex percussion and bass are given the space they need and the Helium510 handles the challenging time signature with a confidence and assurance that many speakers lack. Once again, the three dimensionality and space around the upper registers makes for a satisfying listen. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Amphion Helium510

PRICE
£720

TELEPHONE
07917 685759

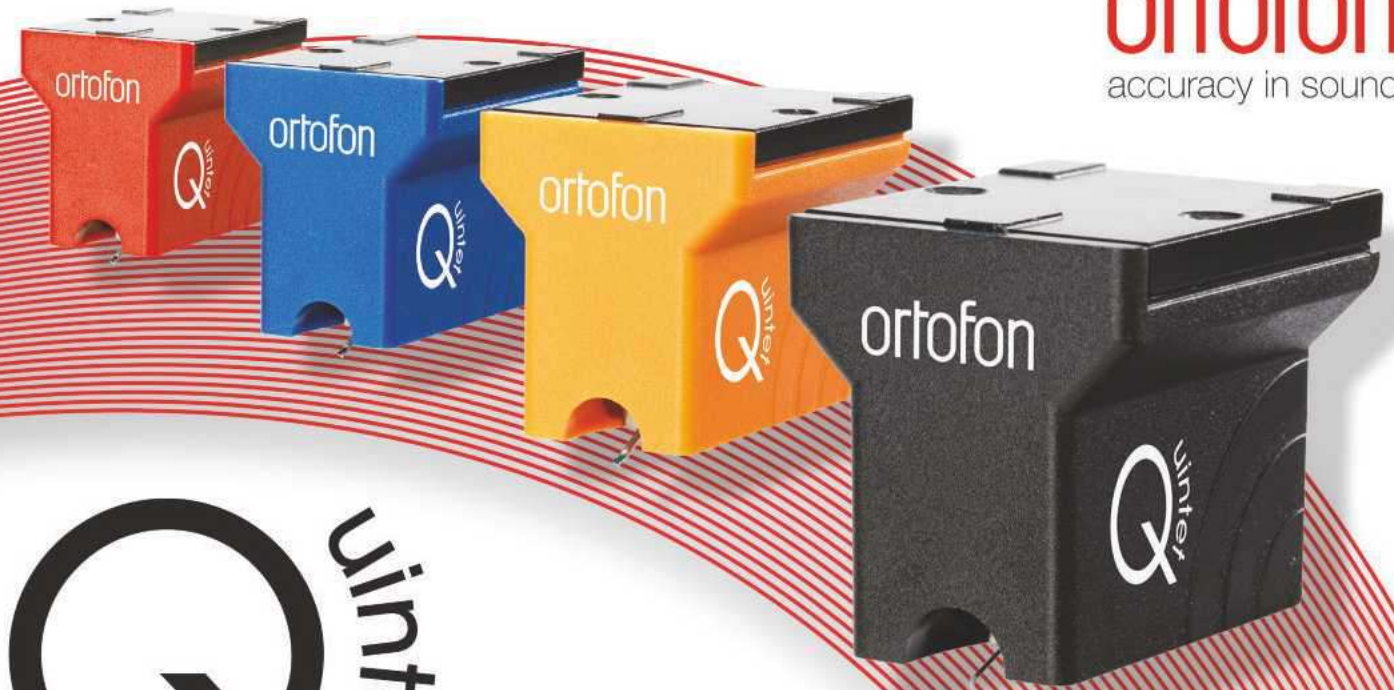
WEBSITE
amphion.fi

REVIEWED
HFC 454

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

ortofon
accuracy in sound

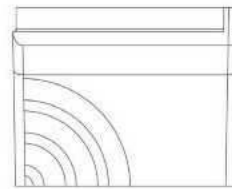
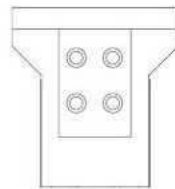
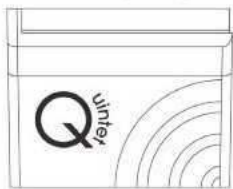


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All Quintet cartridges use the same ABS thermoplastic bodies and neodymium magnets, but each model in the range has its own sonic expression that reflects its status. From the well-rounded **Quintet Red**, through the smooth **Quintet Blue** and spacious yet dynamic **Quintet Bronze**, up to the pure audio excellence of the **Quintet Black S**; this series offers something for every discerning listener at a very attractive price. The Quintet Series also includes a true-mono cartridge, for accurate reproduction of older mono recordings.

Quintet cartridge design



Quintet Black S
May 2014



Quintet Blue
December 2014



Quintet Black S
July 2017



Quintet Blue
July 2019

Bowers & Wilkins 606

AS THE SIXTH generation of the entry-level 600 Series, the 606 features B&W's Continuum cone material trickled down from the 700 Series and employs a 165mm version here, augmented by a rear port.

The 25mm aluminium tweeter also borrows from more upmarket designs and is a Decoupled Double Dome with an extra brace around the edge, said to delay breakup characteristics to over 30kHz. Brief mention should be made of the foam bungs for the rear-firing port. These come in two pieces, allowing you to better control the amount of air flow to enable greater bass tuning.

The appearance of the 606 straddles somewhere between 'clean' and 'functional' depending on your point of view. I'm not sold on the matte black finish, but the cabinet and fitments are well made. It's also available in matte white, but

whichever you opt for, the standard of finish is remarkably smart at the price.

Sound quality

Bowers & Wilkins claims a sensitivity of 88dB into 8ohm for the 606, but it feels more sensitive than that and should present no challenge for even the most anaemic of amps to drive. The balance between top-end sparkle and refinement is beautifully judged and it does a great job of portraying Alison Sudol's vocals in A Fine Frenzy's *Almost Lover*. Piano notes are detailed and have a really convincing level of weight and decay to them. Switch to Daft Punk's *Lose Yourself To Dance* and the 606 combines impressive bass weight with superb timing and drive that's tremendous fun.

The 606 does a great job of opening out the dense and congested recording of The Doors' *Break On Through*, giving it more space and



allowing for fine detail to be better worked into the mix. The top-end refinement ensures that the slightly ragged nature of this recording isn't overly pronounced. This entirely convincing display is rounded off with an excellent rendition of Kendrick Scott Oracle's *Synchrony*. More than just getting to grips with the time signature, the 606 makes the music live and breathe as the work of multiple performers rather than a simple recording. For such an affordable speaker, it's a mighty impressive achievement. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins 606
PRICE
£550
TELEPHONE
0800 2321513
WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com
REVIEWED
HFC 454

OUR VERDICT



Polk Audio Signature S15e

A NEW VERSION of the S15 standmount we saw in HFC 420 (the 'e' is for European) the fundamental spec hasn't changed that much and still combines a 25mm soft-dome tweeter with a 133mm mica/polypropylene mid/bass driver augmented by a rear bass port.

This is of the reflex variety and comes equipped with an additional plastic surround structure that's designed to smooth the airflow. Polk calls this a Power Port, with the additional apparatus intended to deliver far deeper bass than a traditional bass reflex design while allowing the cabinet to be placed right up against a wall.

Sound quality

The S15e is an admirably consistent and entertaining speaker. It powers through The Comet Is Coming's *Super Zodiac* with the sort of drive

and determination that is unusual in such a relatively small design. The bass is well defined, light on its feet and well integrated with the rest of the frequency response.

The upper registers blend seamlessly with the bass and it gains an element of civility that is the difference between it being a model that will delight a specific group of listeners to something that will attract many more admirers.

The Polk balances the potent bleakness of *Believe It* by White Lies neatly, sounding refined and spacious but without losing the propulsive force. Despite the extended frequency response it isn't the most detailed standmount, but it is competitive at the price and the sonic space it creates is a compelling one. The stereo image doesn't extend much beyond the outer edge of the speaker – so a relatively wide placement is



required for the best soundstage – but the space between the cabinets is convincingly filled and crucially manages to impart a feeling of front-to-back depth.

This is a convincing all-round standmount speaker option for entry-level audiophiles. Without sacrificing any of the virtues that were so appealing in the original S15 design, Polk has been able to extract greater refinement and control to turn it into a suave European citizen, making this a very attractive option for anyone starting out. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Polk Audio Signature S15e
PRICE
£250
TELEPHONE
02890 279830
WEBSITE
polkaudio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 449

OUR VERDICT



audiolab 6000 Series

“Best music streamer
under £500”

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amplifier”

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under £500”

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it under £1000”

6000A – Paul Rigby [The Audiophile Man]

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integrated amplifier”

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amplifier”

6000A – Hi-Fi Choice

“Revolutionises budget
CD play”

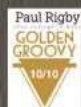
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audiolab.co.uk

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



ELAC

Vela BS 403

Unboxing the reassuringly heavy Vela BS 403, the precision of fit and finish and the quality of the materials is striking. From the front, the German-built loudspeaker looks orthodox enough, albeit with a gently curved baffle and unusual drivers. The bass driver is described as 150mm, but in practice the face is smaller, albeit without dust cap and a generous roll surround that suggests the possibility of some long-throw air shifting. The high notes come from ELAC's Jet 5 tweeter. Looking similar to a ribbon driver this vibrates a very light, finely pleated foil to project high frequencies, with the precision folded surface displacing far more air than a comparable dome. The extreme speed of the tweeter claims to be especially good at reproducing transient dynamics up to 50kHz.

The aluminium base incorporates a V-shaped cavity that integrates an invisible downward-firing port to optimise loading while in theory also allowing more flexibility in placing

the cabinet closer to rear walls. It is available in high gloss white or black priced at £1,750 or walnut adding £90 to the total cost.

Sound quality

Playing Ty Segall's cover of *Every 1's A Winner*, the ELAC instantly locks on to the funky groove. Dense percussion and guitars have fantastic definition and serious punch. Deep bass extension catches me off guard and the stereo image is accurate with a wide sweet spot that accommodates many strong listening positions. The soundscape is precise, but doesn't feel too etched or unforgiving. If anything, a slight diffuseness to the image feels more natural. A heavily distorted guitar riff cuts into the mix, but without any hint of brittleness or excessive sharpness. The Jet 5 tweeter is very smooth and refined and a revelation if you're more accustomed to traditional dome treble.

Frazey Ford's *Three Golden Trees* is also revealing. Leroy Hodges' bassline confidently strides forward; full of

attitude and body, while brother Charles' warbling organ floats high over a remarkably punchy backbeat. This phasy Hammond sound is notoriously difficult to reproduce, but here it's sweet and rich, dripping with honey tones and total coherence. Ford's soulful voice appears centre stage, really showing off the speaker's prowess with vocals. The Vela BS 403 beautifully captures her full emotional expression from intimate frailty to soaring, full-blooded lyrics. The speaker delivers masses of airy treble detail that gives performances greater presence and credibility, and yet it delivers this detail without sounding dry or forward. If you favour vinyl or higher resolution digital music, the clean extended top end of the Vela BS 403 promises super-tweeter credentials. In any modest standmount speaker this sophisticated tweeter should be the hero, but the bass driver punches well above its weight. Given quality amplification with plenty of control, there is a speed, dynamism and fluidity around the bottom octaves that is so well matched to the highly extended and communicative top end that it positively relishes highly dynamic, well-recorded music.

Conclusion

The Vela BS 403 splits the atom to generate serious power from such a tiny package. And rarely does so much dynamism come with such refinement. It is a slightly tougher load than average, demands quality amplification with plenty of grip and relishes room to breathe, so don't cram it. Rarely does such a highly advanced tweeter and mid/bass driver come together in such a small enclosure that is as acoustically smart as it is beautifully constructed. If you're after a loudspeaker that balances form and function with few compromises at an attractive price, you've found it. **CW**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ELAC Vela BS 403

PRICE
£1,750

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
191 x 362 x 240mm

FEATURES
• 1x Jet 5 tweeter
• 1x 150mm
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
HiFi Network Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 643088

WEBSITE
elac.com

REVIEWED
HFC 447

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Highly dynamic, smooth extended treble; strong bass, design and build

DISLIKE: Needs some space to really perform

WE SAY: Dynamic yet highly refined small speaker that packs a mighty punch

Audiodesksysteme PRO Ultrasonic Vinyl Cleaner



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The original Audio Desk Vinyl Cleaner PRO was a superb performer – and it still is, I might add. The PRO 2019 is that much better. It not only corrects some of the wrinkles from the original design, it cleans 7" singles properly and (mostly) efficiently but it improves upon the basic sound quality. Sound had a great 3D effect... as if the information presented to the ear was embossed. Music flowed very easily.

Paul Rigby – The Audiophile Man, October 2019



Falcon Acoustics RAM Studio 20

A two-way ported speaker design, the RAM Studio 20 packs in a 170mm Polypropylene cone mid/bass driver and an offset, 25mm tweeter, giving the choice of an even wider soundstage (tweeter to the outside) or, with the speakers switched on their stands, a slightly less expansive feel but still more tightly focused imaging. At 88dB into 8ohm, the RAM Studio 20 shouldn't require the services of a hulking muscle amplifier to perform well.

Sound quality

Using the Studio 20 with a variety of different amplifiers and, despite its high-ish on-paper sensitivity, it clearly favours those with conspicuous grip, especially in the deep bass where it certainly isn't a reticent performer.

On my first listen, the standmount seems a little sleepy and lush. With *Desperado*, from the *Wallflower* album on vinyl, Diana Krall's voice has real flesh-and-blood body and a sultry smokiness to melt even the coldest of

hearts, while the accompanying wash of violins and cellos has a warmth and richness you sink into like a feather pillow. It's something of a shock if what you're used to is the fashionably pushed midrange, sparkly treble and augmented upper bass of some modern standmount designs or even the open, uncoloured transparency of ATC's £1,300 SCM11 standmount I have waiting in the wings for reference. In a quick showroom comparison with Diana Krall or a similarly swoony ballad, the overarching niceness might be a disincentive to explore further. And if what you really crave is a dry, up-front presentation with lots of spotlight detail then I can say, with a fair degree of confidence, that the Studio 20 isn't going to be for you.

If beguilingly natural, warm and musical is your bag, however, I think it's a speaker you'll want to get to know. This is a wonderfully 'un-edgy' listen that never forgets how to make music, whatever the quality or challenges of the material. A good

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Falcon Acoustics
RAM Studio 20

PRICE
From £1,995

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
13kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
231 x 430 x 266mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm custom
soft-dome tweeter
• 1x 170mm
Polypropylene
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity
88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 446

example is the entertainingly red-raw recording of *The Summit*, a live set on CD that witnesses old masters The Manhattan Transfer and comparatively new tonsils on the block, Take 6, playfully spar via stock-in-trade intricately entwined harmonies, then go for ego-stoked broke with a fiercely alternating back catalogue slapdown. The album finally builds to a phenomenally energetic, all-voices-on-deck climax. A single set of vocal chords is a searching test for any speaker, but keeping 10 powerfully meshed voices and a revved-up backing band properly separated, dynamically convincing and tonally believable can be a nightmare. The way the RAM Studio 20 and ATC SCM 11 approach the task is thrillingly illuminating.

The ATC's great strength is that it brilliantly captures the attack, venue air and live excitement of the final, rip-roaring track, but doesn't forgive or pull the slightly ragged-edge of the recording. The Studio 20 does. It sounds plusher, smoother and slightly darker. It has more bass that goes deeper and isn't as fast or taut as the ATC's, but will give many a capable floorstander a run for their money. In truth, the balance errs towards warmth and body. As such, it doesn't capture the last degree of excitement and venue ambience, but it does wonders for the weight and timbral realism of the competing voices – which bolsters enjoyment and has an irresistible emotional draw.

Conclusion

The acid test? I doubt the Studio 20 would win much favour among those seeking forensic levels of detail with which to dissect a recording. As a wide-bandwidth, high-performance standmount that sounds easy and natural and – as Bruno Mars might have it – is dripping with musical finesse, I'm struggling to think of a design that does it better. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Easy-breathing, full-bodied sound quality; build and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Needs a grippy amp to fully control bass

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A somewhat warmer-sounding studio monitor, maybe, but an absolute dream to live with at home

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Kudos Titan 505

Don't be fooled by the compact exterior, this is one of the best standmounts that we've ever heard

In the face of it, the Titan 505 is a relatively conventional two-way design, but a third drive unit lurks inside. This is identical to the main 180mm driver, featuring a doubly coated paper cone, and is mounted back to back and wired out of phase in an isobaric configuration. A rear bass port is incorporated into the bottom panel. Treble is handled by a 29mm soft-dome tweeter made, like the bass drivers, by Norwegian specialist SEAS. In addition, the mid/bass driver is a design specific to Kudos, and features copper shorting rings on the pole piece for lower distortion, plus the distinctive aluminium phase plug with engraved logo. Mating the two units is a typically minimalist Kudos crossover featuring low order slopes.

No matter what I throw at it, the 505 remains composed, deep and punchy

To control resonances, the cabinet is constructed from high-density fibre board that varies in thickness, and constrained layer damping is also a feature of the side panels. In addition, the internal baffle to which the second bass driver is mounted acts as a further brace. As a result, the heavyweight and remarkably solid cabinet passes the time-honoured knuckle-rap test with aplomb.

The matching stand (not pictured) is well worth the extra outlay as the pair look superb together. It has seven legs; six of which can be filled with your choice of sand, audiophile gravel or other suitable damping material. I use some Atacama Atabites from my own speaker stands and find that around half full is about right.

For auditioning, the 505 is fed by my Naim Supernait integrated, with sources including a Naim CD5 XS/FlatCap XS and a Michell Gyro SE

turntable sporting SME 309 tonearm and Clearaudio MC Essence cartridge into an Anatek MC1 phono stage.

Sound quality

I start off placing the 505 in a similar position to where my usual speakers normally reside, but this makes the bass a little lumpy so I try it further away from both side and rear walls. After some trial and error, the final position sees the speaker around 45cm from the side walls and just over 90cm from the rear, with a slight toe-in towards my listening position for the most stable soundstage.

The 505 has an even tonal balance that doesn't highlight any particular part of the frequency range, with everything clear and evenly handled. Imaging is a particular delight with a focus and depth of scale that is at times quite jaw dropping. The backing soprano saxophone from Gretchen Peters' *On A Bus To St. Cloud* is always located on the left of the action, but the 505 makes it clear just how far behind the main vocal it is – at one point I wonder if I can get up, wander round the back and tap Phil Kenzie on the shoulder as he plays.

The Kudos is an absolute master of soundstaging. It paints a vivid sonic picture between the cabinets and pulls the main action out towards the listener while layering the backing aspects perfectly behind. Lateral image width is broad, but without the feeling of artificial showiness. Precise imaging like this is often achieved by designs housed in far larger cabinets, but the 505 can hold its head up high.

The other thing that usually requires much larger cabinets is decent, hefty bass and this is another area in which it performs with aplomb. The gargantuan low-end on Trentemoller's *Chameleon* gently points out it's a little short of being a monstrous bass behemoth, but even so the multi-layered basslines come through strongly and cleanly with stunning definition and no hint of discomfort. The isobaric bass driver configuration

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Kudos Audio
Titan 505

PRICE
From £7,000

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
256 x 450 x 320mm

FEATURES
• 1x 29mm fabric-dome tweeter
• 2x 180mm mid/bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Kudos Audio

TELEPHONE
08454 586698

WEBSITE
kudosaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 451

is clearly paying dividends here and ensures music always sounds big. This is a trick we've all heard from small transducers that sound impressive initially, but turn out to either be over ported and working too hard, or just bloated at the bottom end and thus suffer in detail terms.

In looking to see if there are any chinks in the 505's armour in this respect, I draw a complete and utter blank. No matter what I throw at it, it remains composed, deep and punchy. However, slipping the likes of Paul Simon's *Graceland* into the CD player also reveals that the low-end detail retrieval is truly first class. Bakithi Kumalo's fretless bass underpins every track exquisitely, with each note distinct and well formed.

Treble performance is truly the icing on the cake. There is a seamless handover from the mid/bass driver to the treble units and the wealth of detail that the SEAS-Kudos K3 unit extracts is exceptional. That said, the standmount never sounds hard or bright and I do initially wonder if it's a little over smooth before quickly realising that it's missing absolutely nothing. Playing devil's advocate, I can imagine that some rockers might want a little more 'edge' to the performance, but otherwise it's perfectly judged. Cymbals are crisp and have a deliciously metallic sheen, and guitar string plucks are sharply etched and perfectly defined.

Conclusion

In the case of the Titan 505, Kudos has extracted a truly room-filling sound from a relatively small cabinet and this standmount is an absolute delight with whatever material you care to feed it. Personally – speaking as a fan of big, brawny loudspeaker designs – my time with more compact cabinets can often end with a feeling of compromise but this certainly isn't the case with the Titan 505, which is absolutely brilliant, full stop. **AS**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Bass weight and detail; drive unit integration; delightful treble; stereo imaging
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Needs some care with placement
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Impressive scale and dynamics make this a remarkably engaging standmount
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Q Acoustics Concept 300

The latest high-end loudspeaker design to join the Concept series is a highly stylish standmount that walks tall

Effectively a Concept 500 floorstander (HFC 426) that's shrunk in the wash, this new standmount is fairly narrow, not particularly tall but deeper than you would expect. Along with its snazzy Tensegrity stand, it's a two-way reflex-ported design with an internal cabinet volume of 11.4 litres, sporting a 28mm dome tweeter that crosses over to a 165mm mid/bass driver at 2.5kHz. Q Acoustics quotes a frequency response of 55Hz to 30kHz at -6dB, which is nothing to write home about. Claimed sensitivity – 84dB/1W/1m – is pretty mediocre for a modern design, although impedance is said to drop down to an absolute minimum of 4.7ohm, meaning it's not too hard a load.

The finish is certainly very good indeed, with a choice of gloss black/

At high volumes, in my largish room, it shows surprising grace under pressure

rosewood, gloss white/oak and silver/ebony – and it is heavier and more solid feeling than you would expect. This is down to Dual Gelcore construction and internal point-to-point bracing (P2P).

There's also an unusual built-in isolation base fitted to the bottom of the cabinet, that works in conjunction with the supplied Tensegrity stand to decouple the speaker from the room, and vice versa.

Sound quality

First impressions are of an even yet warm-sounding loudspeaker with unexpectedly large amounts of midband detail, a bouncy bottom end and enjoyable musicality. The standout feature is its combination of tonal smoothness and overall clarity. Some rivals acquire a sense of detail thanks to artificial forwardness, but the Q Acoustics serves up an even

sound with few apparent peaks or troughs – save a slight 'sweet spot' in the upper bass, which gives added impetus to beat-driven music. Supertramp's *Oh Darling* can sound a little bright, but here is the very essence of sophistication.

I am particularly impressed with the speaker's vocal purity. This classic rock track has a lot going on, but even a good design can occlude basic aspects of its production. Not so the Concept 300, which lets me hear the vocal harmonies more easily than most designs anywhere near its price. Indeed there's a lot of insight into the recording, with surprisingly little overhang from fast-struck transients like snare drums. This means that the listener gets to hear right into the mix, and is able to follow individual strands with ease. I particularly like how simple the backing keyboard glide is to follow, even through the song's complex crescendos.

Bass is good for a standmount, but you never forget that it is precisely this. It adds a little warmth to the proceedings, meaning there's more 'oomph' to kick drums and the upper notes of a bass guitar than there strictly should be. The Clash's *Guns Of Brixton* shows this, with this classic new-wave track getting a taut bottom end that syncopates well with the scratchy guitar work higher up, but it still sounds quite fulsome. Transients start crisply, especially further up into the midband, as evidenced by its deft handling of the snare drum work. Still, there is an obvious lack of bass extension although this is made up for by the speaker's bouncy upper bass, which is surprisingly free of bloat.

The result is a smallish loudspeaker that sounds far bigger than it really has any right to. Feed it with the chest-rattling lower frequencies of Gregory Isaacs' *Night Nurse* – a classic slice of early eighties lovers' rock – and you're left in no doubt that it's no PA stack. The Concept 300 is certainly dynamic at low and medium volume levels, but squirt some serious

juice in and there's a sense that it sits on peaks; the sound gets a little more rounded and constrained at really high listening levels. In its defence, the same is true for all other similarly sized rivals, it's just that the Concept 300's well controlled cabinet sometimes fools you into thinking it will go louder than it actually can. At high volumes in my largish room, however, it still shows surprising grace under pressure.

The speaker's deftness with so-called micro dynamics – those tiny musical accents – allied to its overall transient speed and lack of overhang, make for a very enjoyable listen. The Crusaders' *Street Life* is a late seventies jazz funk standard and this speaker gives it a great airing. Although not lightning fast, it can certainly get a move on in the timing department and the result is fun – the song chugs along at a good rate of knots, so to speak. The crisp, delicate portrayal of hi-hat strikes and rim shots makes things sound all the faster; the lack of midband colouration really helping here, with no sense of the cabinet slurring things. This means that the rhythmic aspect to the Fender Rhodes keyboard playing is a real joy to hear.

Instruments are placed accurately within the recorded acoustic, giving classical music – such as Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, playing Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* – a surprisingly believable and tactile feel. Indeed the Concept 300 makes a surprisingly good fist of this beautiful piece of music, with an enjoyably capacious, out-of-the-box feel.

Conclusion

Highly capable across the board, a lot of thought has been put into the Concept 300. The result is a charming sound that puts the accent on civility and smoothness – but never at the expense of musical enjoyment – making it excellent value for money. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics
Concept 300

PRICE
£3,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
14.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 355 x 400mm

FEATURES
• 1x 28mm soft
dome tweeter
• 1x 165mm mid/
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
84dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 448

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Detailed midband; warm tonality; musical gait

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Middling bass extension

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WESAY: Great value, premium-priced standmount

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL



The First Word in Music Streaming.



Music. Literally the first word in 'music streaming', and always our top priority. Our network players feature cutting-edge technology – developed over 3 years by 25 expert engineers at our Salisbury HQ – but more importantly stay true to our founding mission, to take you closer to the authentic emotion of the music you love.

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Awards for NDX 2





seems uncannily easy to peer into the mix, separating elements with aplomb.

Listen hard and you can hear a slight opacity to its upper ranges – and this is most obvious with shiny, super-clean recordings like Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way*. This eighties track shows up the tweeter's slight lack of delicacy, although it never sounds coarse. At the same time, it's clear that the midband softens things out a bit, lending its own – admittedly subtle – sonic fingerprint to the proceedings.

For example, it is unable to resolve the chiming sound of the track's early digital synthesiser in all its glory, and brings just a touch of nasality to vocals in absolute terms. Given its very modest price, this is not a criticism, but merely a remark. Yet the great thing about the Linton is it covers its tracks so well. Although not the greatest speaker ever made, you never find yourself dwelling on this point. Instead whatever I play, it gets into the musical groove.

Every recording I put on sounds surprisingly large and expansive. Haitink's superb reading of Vaughan Williams' *Symphony No.2* sounds wonderfully atmospheric with a great sense of the recorded acoustic, for example. Depth perspective is a real standout strength for this speaker, too.

Another pleasing facet is its dynamic headroom; it's able to track musical crescendos really well for the price. This, allied to its more than decent timing, makes for a lively, vibrant rendition of anything you care to play through it.

Conclusion

The Wharfedale Linton re-imagines the past, rather than recreating it. It delivers so much of what was great about wide-baffle loudspeakers – the ease, effortless musicality and room filling physicality – and yet consigns the problems of vagueness, dynamic compression and poor transient response to the dustbin of history. **DP**

Wharfedale Linton

Linton will ring like a bell to audiophiles of a certain age that remember the original three-way

loudspeaker with a real wood cabinet and a warm, musical sound. This new version is far larger, however, and instead of paper and polymer for its bass and mid drivers, it uses woven Kevlar in 200mm and 135mm sizes respectively. Also, the old soft-dome tweeter is now a 25mm fabric dome with a metal grille over it. Crossover frequencies are 630Hz and 2.4kHz.

The cabinet is reflex-loaded via twin rear-mounted ports, unlike the original's infinite baffle design, and this confers dramatically better sensitivity (90dB up from 86dB) and bass extension (35Hz down from 60Hz). The grilles are removable, but the speaker sounds better with them in place as they're specially designed to aid dispersion of the tweeter. Interestingly, the speakers are 'handed', and its recommended that the tweeters should be positioned inwards. There's also an optional pair

of dedicated stands (not pictured) for £280 per pair, but if you buy both together the total cost is just £1,100.

Sound quality

This speaker sounds strangely modern – far more than you would expect by looking at it – while avoiding the pitfalls of both classic and new designs. I start off with ELO's *Mr Blue Sky* and this standmount belts it out with relish. There's an uncanny feeling of lots of air moving around the room, yet despite this it still sounds really relaxed, showing tremendous grace under pressure.

Thanks to this relaxed, insouciant character, the music saunters along happily and everything sounds fun. For example, Rush's *Subdivisions* is both dense and compressed, yet the Linton makes it seriously special. As the song powers along, it separates out the individual elements of the mix with surprising ease. I can enjoy all the musicians playing together really tightly, hearing them coming together to make one cohesive whole. It also

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wharfedale
Linton

PRICE
£1,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
300 x 565 x 330mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm textile
dome tweeter
• 1x 135mm
midrange driver
• 1x 200mm
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
wharfedale.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 452

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Large-scale, authoritative, engaging sound; build; price

DISLIKE: Speaker stand design not for all

WE SAY: A piece of truly modern budget esoterica that just happens to look retro

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ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKER



Bowers & Wilkins

Formation Duo/Audio

As B&W moves into multi-room audio, it's time for the Formation Duo speaker solution to reveal just what it's capable of

As a pair of standmount speakers, the Duo shares the same 25mm carbon dome tweeter that is used in B&W's 700 Series partnered with a Continuum 165mm mid/bass driver using trickle-down tech from the 800 Series. As an active loudspeaker, each cabinet has a Class D amplifier housed in a separate module at the bottom of the speaker cabinet and claims 125W power output.

As well as being an active speaker design, the Formation Duo offers wired and wireless connectivity and connects to a home network using a MESH system, which utilises a number of different receivers on

As lifestyle products go, this is definitely positioned on the high-fidelity side

different frequencies to accept data and maintain sync between the left and right channels.

There is also support for AirPlay 2 devices and aptX HD Bluetooth, and the primary means of streaming music is using Roon management software via a core device.

If you're looking to connect more conventional component sources such as a CD player, for example, the £600 Formation Audio adapter box is a useful add-on that offers analogue stereo RCAs and digital optical inputs along with stereo RCAs and coaxial digital outputs. It's a neat way of integrating existing components into Formation's multi-room network.

Open the well thought-out packaging, ensure the components have power and the control app will run you through the setup process in a very slick way, making this one of the more fool-proof setup procedures I've seen.

Once up and running, the Formation devices function as a single cohesive system. I have heard wireless stereo speakers with less ornate networking hardware sound entirely together, but the Duo feels every bit as synchronised as a pair of passive speakers on the end of a seriously talented amplifier.

At the moment, the Formation products stream to a maximum of 24-bit/96kHz. Although this is going to be sufficient for most music libraries, Bowers & Wilkins says it's more interested in stability than a notional headline-grabbing claim. In the event that you have already accrued music at higher sample rates, Roon's software can be enabled to down sample prior to playback.

Sound quality

The Duo has a potency and immediacy that is subtly different from a passive ported speaker. Listen to *Telephasic Workshop* by Boards of Canada and the speed and impact of the bass is deeply impressive. Each strike is deep and makes B&W's claim of reaching down to 25Hz entirely believable, and it's wielded with a speed and articulation that really brings it to life.

As a result of having this force and scale to hand, the Duo is able to take even very large-scale material and reproduce it correctly. I find it's worth using the dedicated stands to bring a little more bottom end control and seemingly reduce the feeling of the cabinet being present in the music to deliver a level of insight that's more akin to a studio monitor. It finds new detail in material I feel I know well and has exceptional tonal realism.

Monkey by Robert Plant is rich and room filling, but never loses any of its immediacy or timing. This is helped by the amount of headroom on offer.

The balance the Duo strikes between delivering great recordings

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins
Formation Duo/Audio

PRICE
£3,500/£600

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Wireless streaming
loudspeaker system

WEIGHT
10.6kg (Duo)
1kg (Audio)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
197 x 395 x 305mm
(Duo)
215 x 44 x 263mm
(Audio)

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm carbon dome tweeter
• 1x 165mm Continuum mid/bass driver
• Wired and wireless streaming with support for PCM up to 24-bit/96kHz
• AirPlay 2; aptX HD Bluetooth; Roon ready
• Inputs: 1x RCA analogue; 1x optical (Audio adapter)

DISTRIBUTOR
B&W Group Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

REVIEWED
HFC 453

with all of their fidelity intact while also ensuring that less than perfect material is similarly well handled is a notable success. As lifestyle products go, it definitely sits on the high-fidelity side; the decision to encourage the use of Roon, in turn should steer most owners to a world of lossless and hi-res and fits perfectly with how it goes about making music. If you do fire up AirPlay and use compressed services, it is impressive how many of the positive qualities of the Duo's character remain. I would regard using it without Roon software as under utilising its capabilities, but it still sounds impressive all the same.

Using the Formation Audio adapter as an interface to integrate existing hardware with the Duo does not substantially alter the presentation and shows that it's sufficiently transparent that the character of any source survives the process of being digitised and transmitted wirelessly to the loudspeaker. Connecting my Michell GyroDec via a Cyrus Phono Signature phono stage (HFC 408) to the analogue input successfully conveys the GyroDec's effortless stereo width and rhythmic ability. It might not be an ideal approach for analogue purists, but it certainly works very well.

Conclusion

The only matter that's really in question is the one of worth. I think the Duo feels a little expensive for what it is. The convenience aspect and the technical accomplishment that underpins it are unquestionably top notch, but other notionally less sophisticated systems are equally capable of offering a similar experience for a considerably lower outlay. However, I can see many potential customers being bowled over by the heady balance of performance, aesthetics and overall convenience that this incredibly clever speaker system has to offer. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Superb sonic performance; utterly stable MESH networking; easy setup

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Some limits to the spec; price

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WE SAY: Combines multi-room flexibility and scintillating audio performance to impressive effect

OVERALL



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Dynaudio

Xeo 20

Danish speaker manufacturer Dynaudio describes the Xeo 20 as a compact digital active wireless hi-fi speaker delivering hi-fi performance without the hi-fi system. The Xeo 20's cabinet, sports a rear-firing slot-type bass port, with the metal elements of the drivers finished in black and the infra-red receiver incorporated in a logo plate, for a more balanced-looking baffle when the magnetically attached grille is removed.

The 140mm Esotec magnesium silicate polymer (MSP) mid/bass driver and 28mm Esotec soft dome tweeter are no different to those used in the Xeo 4 and each is powered by a dedicated 65W Class D amplifier module. But it's the DSP-derived crossover network, together with large internal volume and zero fluff voicing lifted from Dynaudio's LYD 5 pro studio nearfield monitor, that are claimed to cement this small speaker's sonic credibility.

The master speaker includes three direct source inputs: Toslink digital

optical, stereo RCA phono and 3.5mm mini-jack plus a USB port to update firmware. And a dead convenient switch to 'hand' the master speaker as left or right channel (there's a corresponding one on the back of the other speaker). By-passing cables altogether is aptX Bluetooth. Talking of cables, you won't need the speaker variety as the master cabinet communicates with its 'slave' via a full-fat 24-bit/96kHz wireless signal.

Sound quality

Initially, the Xeo 20's sound seems too pristine, too squeaky clean, and a little too hyper real. Crisp sounds crisper, soft sounds softer, separation crystallises out of the haze – only it's a haze you never registered before. Hearing finer degrees of subtlety and nuance, hearing things for the first time – both are hi-fi clichés, but prove to be more than apt here. The swirling textures and wispy organ counterpoints of the background synth wash on Michael McDonald's *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* have a

transparency and tender beauty that's achingly delicate and yet every strand remains clear and distinct when he – seemingly a fully three-dimensional and palpable presence in front of the speakers – challenges the Xeo's dynamic reach with a soaring, soulful, slightly muffled vocal. Where even good passive speakers tend to blur the quietest detail when things get loud and busy, the active Xeo 20 preserves it and keeps it in perfect proportion.

This isn't to say that the Dynaudio can't switch it up when asked. Muse's *Simulation Theory* sounds suitably massive and dense on vinyl as dispatched to the line-level input from my Elipson Omega 100 Carbon Black and Rega Fono phono stage. *Algorithm* is a pounding, synth-laced, pomp rock powerhouse that bumps along the ragged edge of overkill so joyously it's almost a crime not to crank up the volume. The Xeo 20 gives the track all the low-frequency weight and drive it deserves and, more remarkably still, great dynamic freedom. It's enough to break out the air keyboard, but for those less inclined to get carried away just soaking up the pitch-perfect rendition of the instrumental collision and work rate could be reward enough.

Conclusion

If ever there was a perfect example of win-win for the hi-fi shopper, this is surely it. Assuming high-performance system seekers aren't set on separates, they'll be in clover. Yes, it is amazing how good iPlayer Radio 4 can sound via aptX Bluetooth as handled by the active Dynaudio. Moreover, it's small and smart and doesn't need an equipment rack. But the real beauty of the Xeo 20 is what it can do with a hi-res digital feed or even CD, not to mention vinyl. Active speakers have been absent from our homes for too long, but thanks to the arrival of designs like this the movement is gathering momentum and, for music lovers, that's great news. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dynaudio Xeo 20

PRICE
£2,000

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
2-way active wireless standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
180 x 320 x 257mm

FEATURES
• 1x 28mm soft dome tweeter
• 1x 140mm mid/bass driver
• Inputs: 1x digital optical; 1x stereo RCAs; 1x 3.5mm mini-jack; aptX Bluetooth; wi-fi via add-on Connect unit

DISTRIBUTOR
Dynaudio UK

TELEPHONE
01863 721089

WEBSITE
dynaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 444

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Compact; flexible; terrific, studio-clear sound quality

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Care needed with positioning; DSP EQ settings

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WE SAY: Seldom has clutter-free convenience looked or sounded so good

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKER



ELAC

Navis ARB-51

Joining the powered-loudspeaker movement, this compact yet mighty standmount ticks plenty of boxes

With its Navis ARB-51, ELAC's brief was to make a great-sounding small speaker that can also work wirelessly. There are wireless speakers and there are active speakers, but I can't think of many that work the way this package does. Designer Andrew Jones points out that this is a true, active speaker rather than a powered wireless one. It has a purely analogue signal path from the preamp to the electronic active crossover, which then divides up bass, mid and treble duties and sends them to amplifiers, which in turn power the drivers.

To be clear, there is no digital signal processing inside; this is pure analogue active. The user simply needs to add a preamplifier or digital source with a variable line output and send the signal via unbalanced RCA or

mounted coaxial tweeter/midrange array underpinned by a separate bass driver. The high-frequency unit is a 25mm soft dome tweeter, the mid driver is a 100mm aluminium cone and the bass unit is a 130mm aluminium cone. All together, they give a claimed frequency response of 44Hz to 28kHz.

The ARB-51 is easy to connect to an analogue preamplifier, but in wireless mode initially proves a bit glitchy and takes a while to pair to the Discovery Connect module. The control app feels a little behind the times, but criticisms quickly fade away once everything is up and running.

The cabinet is a bass-reflex design, and comes in a choice of high gloss black, white or ebony emara wood veneer finishes.

Sound quality

This is one of the most interesting small speakers I have come across in a long time. Whether feeding it digital or analogue, the ARB-51 really sings. It's innately musical and relishes rhythm-based music like Manix's *Living In The Past*. This is high-paced, punchy techno with hyperactive sub-bass, and the ELAC dives into the mix head first. It shows unexpectedly good bass extension for its size, and is disconcerting in the way that it seems able to live and breathe totally independently of the very busy midband with its frenzied snare drum fills and keyboard breaks.

The way it is able to communicate such a dizzying amount of detail and yet hold on to a thunderous bass line is quite a revelation – I suspect being both active and a true three-way helps. It comes into its own with Randy Crawford's *You Might Need Somebody*. Here the ELAC's subtlety comes into play and it's able to drill down right into the spaces between the notes and show the players' superb syncopation. Crawford's powerful vocals dance around the slick rhythm, bass guitar work and laid back Fender Rhodes playing, and the result is magic.

The Navis ARB-51 revels in sounding so much bigger than you'd expect

balanced XLR cables to the speaker. But there is more – as there's also a £400 outboard Discovery Connect DS-C101W-G wireless and streaming module, which sends music to each speaker via ELAC's proprietary AirX² protocol in 16-bit/44.1kHz resolution, and also supports AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect, Roon and Bluetooth. So, you can use the ELAC either as a pure analogue active or as a wireless speaker, complete with app control.

The ARB-51 has a thick aluminium base, inside which is housed 160W of Class AB BASH amplification to the bass driver and 100W of Class AB BASH to the midrange, plus 40W of Class AB to the tweeter. On the back, are switches to tweak the levels of each driver – flat, +1 or –1dB – and this is done in the analogue domain.

The drivers are ELAC's own, custom designed by Andrew Jones. It's a true three-way design, with a concentrically

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ELAC Navis ARB-51

PRICE
£1,800

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Wireless active
standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
189 x 345 x 240mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm tweeter
• 1x 100mm
midrange driver
• 1x 130mm
bass driver
• Inputs: 1x RCA;
1x XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 643088

WEBSITE
hifi-network.com

REVIEWED
HFC 452

Throw some heavily compressed indie guitar pop at it – in the shape of Ride's *Twisterella* – and it remains totally undaunted. I can push it to surprisingly high levels in my mid-sized listening room before any fatigue sets in. Not only is it nicely balanced tonally, it doesn't fall apart when you hit the loud pedal. This track is awash with layer after layer of guitar, with closely miked vocals on top – and the speaker keeps on punching out the music in a dynamic, seat-of-the-pants way. It also retains its composure enough to carry the backing vocals in a satisfyingly clean and clear way, too.

The concentric tweeter/mid-driver gives a point-source and it feels like all the music arrives at the listener at the same time. This is great spatially; the stereo image is permanently in focus and there's a sense you can move around your room and still get a good impression of the original recorded acoustic. Simon and Garfunkel's *America* is carried in all its expansive glory – with acoustic guitar far stage left and drums far right. The ELAC really revels in being able to do its 'out-of-the-box' trick, sounding so much bigger than you'd expect considering its size.

Any complaints? Well, the treble doesn't quite have the finesse of a more high-end speaker. The cymbals of Supergrass' *Sun Hits The Sky* are crisp and clean, if a little lacking in delicacy and silkiness. Via the wireless module the sound is impressive too and the speaker's engaging sound remains intact, although analogue operation is my preferred option.

Conclusion

The Navis ARB-51 is a great little active loudspeaker that punches way above its weight, and also has the added option of fine-sounding wireless connectivity. If sound quality comes first for you, but you absolutely must have a compact standmount, this is a great option to consider. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Immediacy; energy; power and punch

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Occasionally flaky wireless connectivity

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Superb yet affordable compact active speaker system

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

ACTIVE LOUDSPEAKER



KEF LSX

KEF has taken its LS50 Wireless active speaker and made it smaller, cuter and more affordable. Prepare to be smitten

Doing one-stop-shop as well as any, the LSX has Spotify Connect and Tidal built in or you can stream directly from a NAS drive or a computer through DLNA. Wireless hookup between the speakers removes the need for the enclosures to be linked by an Ethernet cable, leaving just the mains cables trailing to the floor from the back of the boxes. It's not all peaches and cream, though. The LSX can handle hi-res files all the way up to 24-bit/192kHz, but downsamples to 24-bit/48kHz if the enclosures are connected wirelessly. Which is why an Ethernet cable is still supplied, guaranteeing both absolute signal stability and the ability to stream at the more desirable 24-bit/96kHz.

The simplest and speediest way to stream is via aptX Bluetooth and

The LSX essentially disappears inside a majestically spacious soundscape

connecting the LSX to a network is straightforward enough. KEF's Control app gets things up and running and gives access to the system's finely calibrated EQ settings so you can tweak the balance according to positioning, room environment and taste.

Where the LS50W takes a hybrid route, combining a 30W Class A/B amp for the tweeter with a 200W Class D module for the mid/bass element of its 130mm Uni-Q driver, the LSX is purely Class D, its 115mm Uni-Q treated to 100W all told. This does wonders for packaging efficiency and, with Class D being cool running, bulky heatsinks aren't required. It's a win for ergonomics as well, leaving room for a more spacious connection panel on the back of the master speaker – not least because the USB Type B and RCA sockets of the LS50W have been dropped. Instead the layout

sees an optical Toslink and 3.5mm auxiliary input take their place just above the Ethernet sockets, USB port for firmware updates and mains socket. There's also an RCA output for roping in a subwoofer.

The cuteness quotient is harder to quantify, but there can't be much doubt the LSX scores highly. It isn't just the curvy tininess teamed with the ever-handsome and, in this case, boldly coloured Uni-Q driver that grab your attention. Mostly responsible for the warm, 'touch me' aesthetic is British designer Michael Young, the latest of KEF's arty design collaborators over the years following in the footsteps of such creative luminaries as Marcel Wanders, Ross Lovegrove and Porsche Design. To celebrate the fact, his signature adorns the olive green edition with its gold cone and subtly red-hued tweeter. The other lively options are no easier to mistake for a regular, veneer-clad standmount box. Choose from red with matching red cone and silver tweeter, the distinctly denim vibe of our review sample's blue with blue cone and silver tweeter; the noir-ish black with black cone and red tweeter or, if the Danish-sourced fabric wrap doesn't grab you, hard-shelled gloss white with silver cone and red tweeter. Build, finish and materials (especially the cloth wraps) are fab to the extent that unnecessary tactile contact is almost a must, and I've never had to write that about a speaker before.

Plumbing the LSX into my home wi-fi network is a doddle, navigating Spotify and Tidal with the companion Stream app not so much, but slick and intuitive enough. First, though, the aptX Bluetooth codec and it's immediately clear that the LSX, while probably more forgiving of bookshelf placement than just about any other speaker I can think of, is more than talented enough to warrant the support of my smaller listening room's resident Slate Audio stands, EQ settings duly adjusted.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
KEF LSX

PRICE
£1,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way active wireless loudspeaker system

WEIGHT
3.6kg (master)
3.5kg (slave)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
155 x 240 x 180mm

FEATURES
• Uni-Q driver array: 19mm aluminium tweeter with 115mm magnesium/aluminium mid/bass driver
• Inputs: 1x digital optical; 1x 3.5mm mini-jack; aptX Bluetooth; wi-fi; Ethernet

DISTRIBUTOR
GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01622 672261

WEBSITE
uk.kef.com

REVIEWED
HFC 446

Sound quality

Even with Bluetooth's limitations, there's a fundamental rightness to the sound – precision, presence, punctuality – that's the hallmark of well-executed active and grounds listening pleasure deep in the music rather than fixate on the usual hi-fi metrics that home in on bass/treble/dynamics hardware performance.

Level 42's keyboard player Mike Lindup's *Madness* counterpoints a dystopian sentiment with the kind of mesmeric, blissed-out jazz-funk that should immerse the listener in its loping bass groove, panned and modulated vocal and boundless soundstage. This the LSX does effortlessly. More remarkable still, there doesn't seem to be any need to make allowances for those Hobbit-like dimensions. The speakers essentially disappear inside a majestically spacious soundscape. It's haunting and then some.

Switching to full-fat Tidal ushers in a commensurate leap in quality, but the basic tenets of the speakers' sonic character stay intact: smooth, rich and natural. Nothing is over egged or underplayed, musical impetus hanging on taut timing and a controlled, tuneful and surprisingly well-extended bass. Shawn Mendes' *Lost In Japan* has a palpable and organic sounding vocal set against a vast, echoing backdrop that removes the physical placement of the speakers from the room.

Conclusion

The LSX can't match the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless – it doesn't go as loud and its bass isn't as deep. But it's close enough and clearly cut from the same sonic cloth. For the money, that's nothing short of astonishing. It's clearly the active ingredient that enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match. That it is also cute as a button seems unfair to the competition. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Size, style, build, flexibility and amazing sound quality

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Two apps instead of one

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A lesson in how to build an active wireless speaker system that looks and sounds fab, but won't break the bank

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Alpha Design Labs Stratos

AS THE SUCCESSOR to the GT40a (HFC 399), the Stratos supports even higher PCM resolutions as well as DSD playback. It also sports DAC, ADC, phono stage and headphone amplifier capabilities but with a more up-to-date spec, 15V DC wall-wart power supply and USB-A-to-USB-B interface cable.

Built around an ESS ES9018K2M SABRE32 Reference Stereo DAC, it supports PCM data rates up to 32-bit/384kHz together with support for DSD64, DSD128 and DSD256.

The USB-B port is 2.0 compliant for fast data transfers and the Stratos can also accept a coaxial S/PDIF or optical digital input. The output can be taken from a pair of RCA phonos for an unbalanced output or two XLR sockets for a balanced one.

On the front there are two sockets for headphones – a 6.35mm stereo

jack for unbalanced output and an XLR-4 balanced output.

Sound quality

A CD of string quartets by Alec Roth performed by the Allegri Quartet shows the delicate fingering of the strings in the *pizzicato* sections of *Dancing (1)* from *String Quartet No.2*. The energetic and lively plucking is believable, superbly clear and the four instruments occupy well-defined points in the soundstage.

Switching to the USB input with a 16/44 file on my PC of Cécile McLorin Salvant singing *Nothing Like You*, the clarity of the double bass and drums is superb. Connecting the line output of the Stratos to my hi-fi, I am again bowled over by the clarity – in particular, the hi-hats, which are crisp and mellifluous. Furthermore, the balance of the piano is spot on.



To test out its capabilities with DSD I have three test files of Mozart's *Violin Concerto in D major*: the first recorded in 24/192 PCM, the second in DSD64 and the third DSD128.

The PCM version treats me to a sprightly and sparkling performance, the DSD64 file is difficult to identify any discernible audible differences and the DSD128 version has a touch more realism and presence. Although the difference is subtle, it is a definite step up from both PCM and DSD64.

The Stratos offers impressively wide-reaching features without compromising sound quality. It's not as competitive as its predecessor, but is remarkably flexible at the price. **NR**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Alpha Design
Labs Stratos

PRICE
£1,315

TELEPHONE
01189 814238

WEBSITE
soundfoundations.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 455

OUR VERDICT



Audiolab M-DAC+

BASED ON AUDIOLAB'S original M-DAC, the M-DAC+ continues to use the same ES9018 Sabre Reference 32-bit DAC chipset, which is still considered to be one of the best off-the-shelf components out there. But, as any DAC designer will tell you, it's all about the implementation – and Audiolab passes the test.

Supporting circuitry includes a proprietary, discrete master clock to minimise jitter; extensive time-domain isolation and a JFET Class A output stage. The upgraded power supply is now inside the chassis, hence the taller and deeper casework, and consists of a precision-wound toroidal transformer with multiple windings to feed separate analogue and digital rectification stages. From there, multiple power supply sections feed the necessary voltages to each area of the DAC, keeping any crossover interference to a minimum.

Rear digital inputs include an AES/EBU socket and an additional USB-A input alongside the existing USB-B connection. PCM runs up to 32-bit/384kHz via USB and DSD support up to DSD256 – so there's plenty of futureproofing headroom. And to round things off, there are user-selectable digital filters – seven for PCM and four for DSD.

Sound quality

This is one assured and full-bodied-sounding DAC with not the merest hint of digital 'edge'. There's a welcome weight and warmth to the presentation that's instantly inviting and doesn't favour one musical genre. Nor does it seem to be notably input biased: USB unlocks its potential, but coaxial and optical aren't far behind.

The M-DAC+ projects an expansive soundstage with three-dimensional images that allow the free-flowing



grace of Robert Len's *Brasilia* the space to breathe without feeling sapped of spirit. It also portrays Joe Sample's jazz-funk stylings on *All God's Children* in a manner that's less obviously busy than rivals. This is in keeping with an unflappable nature that isn't forensic, but is good at balancing competing elements – in this case, silky synth pads and quicksilver keyboard runs.

There are DACs that dive deeper into a recording, but what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. In short, it boasts a grasp of flow and tempo that's as good as any rival offering at the price. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab M-DAC+

PRICE
£800

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 449

OUR VERDICT



Musical Fidelity M6s DAC

THIS UPMARKET LOOKING

model boasts some impressive technical stats to mark it out from the competition: stereo separation better than 120dB; signal to noise better than 119dB; and linearity better than 110dB. Jitter is claimed to be immeasurably low, with noise and distortion artefacts all but eliminated, a combination said to optimise imaging, detail and transparency.

Evolved from the M6 DAC, the 's' now does the upsampling/reclocking thing and includes a volume control, making it possible to plumb it straight into a power amplifier or active speakers. Under the bonnet are four stereo 32-bit DACs arranged in a fully differential (balanced) dual mono topology. This configuration works with a 32-bit sample rate converter circuit which asynchronously upsamples all incoming data rates to 768kHz internally.

As you might expect, PCM signals can be handled up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD up to DSD128.

Sound quality

The M6s DAC sounds extraordinary. Its soundstage is wide, deep and holographic while its imaging has pinpoint specificity and presence you feel you can reach out and touch. Highs are more clearly defined, lows deeper and more visceral, and dynamic swings of an order you'd swear were the work of a much more expensive and muscular amplifier than the Hegel H90 integrated I'm using it with here. And it's all proudly digital, devoid of mellifluous manipulation and euphonic shading, locking astonishing transparency with startling dynamic expression.



Whether I cue up Sonny Rollins or Joe Sample, it's clear that I'm hearing that much deeper into the recording, the M6s DAC brushing away the dust from nuances of technique and the recording acoustic missed altogether by rivals. Raising the source resolution opens things up even more, the DAC's essential transparency and gift for projecting images with the finest low-level detail cementing a sense of realism that only the very best DACs can nail. Robert Len's *Brasilia* takes on a sense of dimensionality that means you don't have to listen hard to hear exactly what's going on as the track's intent and emotion are transmitted unsullied and are more powerfully felt as a result. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
M6s DAC

PRICE
£1,400

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 449

OUR VERDICT



Mytek Brooklyn DAC+

REPLACING THE ORIGINAL

Brooklyn DAC (HFC 416), this is an analogue and digital preamp with balanced and unbalanced outputs with a DAC section that can decode DSD natively up to DSD256, PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and does MQA. The analogue input can be line-level or MM/MC phono.

Out goes the original's ES9018 Sabre Reference 32-bit DAC chipset, replaced by the ES9028 Sabre Pro 32-bit option. This is joined by a higher grade analogue attenuator circuit and dual mono analogue path. The upshot, claims Mytek, is improved analogue input performance and transparency while the headphone amp offers more detail and definition.

The supplied slim remote, which must be paired up with the DAC, is a joy, but the tiny buttons on the fascia (black on black if you go for the black, rather than silver, finish) are

hard to see and fiddly to operate. Such gripes are minor when you hear what it can do, though.

Sound quality

In some respects, the Brooklyn DAC+ sounds like the Musical Fidelity above. It has the same desire to drill right down into a recording and deliver the kind of otherwise vanishingly small details that bring the final sheen of believability to a performance. And, like the MF, it does so without the help of any deliberate analogue flavouring. Tonally, it's a little lighter and more explicit in the treble which adds more 'air' to proceedings and, rhythmically, perhaps a hair tighter.

It's a feisty, front-foot presentation and certainly helps enliven Sonny Rollins' *St. Thomas* which usually



sounds starved of air, 24/96 or not. The Mytek seems to encourage pep and pace which isn't unpleasant in the least. In fact, an enhanced sense of performance is something of a given, translating into greater immediacy, impact and musical communication.

While it respects the wide soundstage of Robert Len's *Brasilia*, the track doesn't sound quite as affectingly ethereal and dreamy as it might. Here, the warmer-sounding M-DAC+ (opposite) does a better job, despite lacking the Mytek's definition. On the other hand, Joe Sample's *All God's Children* romps along in style with plenty of punch and panache, offering a clear insight into why Marcus Miller is such a phenomenal bass player. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mytek
Brooklyn DAC+

PRICE
£1,800

TELEPHONE
01484 538438

WEBSITE
mcru.co.uk;
mytekdigital.com

REVIEWED
HFC 449

OUR VERDICT





Audiolab 6000A

Expanding the number of sources that the original could handle, the new 6000A is very much about “traditional values in a modern setting” and adds DAC functionality and Bluetooth wireless connectivity with aptX support, as well as having a moving-magnet phono stage and headphone output. It sports an ESS Sabre ES9018 converter chip, alongside four S/PDIF digital inputs – two coaxial and two optical – offering support up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM. Three user-selectable digital filters – fast roll-off, slow roll-off and minimum phase – let you tune the sound to taste.

At the heart of the amplifier, there’s a discrete Class AB power amp stage delivering a claimed 50W per channel into 8ohm. The output stage uses complementary feedback topology, which Audiolab claims gives superior linearity and good thermal stability, as the idle current is kept independent of the temperature of output transistors. Meanwhile, the preamplifier section is as simple as possible, giving -80dB to +8dB in steps of 2dB and 1dB – the step resolution increases the higher the volume position.

The 6000A sports a JFET-based phono preamplifier section with three operational modes – integrated, pre-power and preamplifier. The mode selector toggles between these, and also gives the set-up menu where you can select balance, digital filter type

and standby time, etc. It’s a very tidily packaged amp that’s easy to use.

Sound quality

This is a surprisingly sophisticated-sounding integrated that belies its low price and never offends sonically. It presents a dry and clean rendition of the music, with no overhang in the bass or any sense of richness or bloat. The midband is clean and spry, casting a light on the recording that leaves little room for doubt about what’s going on. Up top, treble is crisp and accurate with a well-etched feel.

The result is that thin-sounding recordings like *The Wind Blows Your Hair* by Naz Nomad And The Nightmares don’t get any sweeter. Warmer tracks like *White Bird* by It’s A Beautiful Day defrost a little, but you’re hardly cosseted by the amp’s opulent tonality. For this reason, anyone contemplating buying this integrated should consider partnering it with rich, full-sounding speakers, as opposed to more analytical ones.

Despite its dry tonality, it’s still great fun to hear. Bassheads’ electro stomper *Is There Anybody Out There?* proves a joy – the Audiolab serving up serious amounts of power, moving air around the room with alacrity. Although not the world’s most emotional-sounding amplifier, it’s good at transients and duly captures the natural starts and stops of the electronic percussion very well indeed. You get quite a technical style of presentation, yet it’s enjoyable

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab 6000A
PRICE
£600
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
7.8kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
445 x 66 x 300mm
FEATURES
• Quoted Power output: 2x 50W into 8ohm
• Digital inputs: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; Bluetooth with aptX
• Analogue inputs: 3x RCAs; 1x MM phono
DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Group Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01480 447700
WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 444

all the same. I find myself focusing on the interplay between the snare and the looped hi-hats, as the bass synthesiser punches out vast tracts of low frequencies with surprising ease.

Fed a high-quality recording such as Peter Gabriel’s *Here Comes The Flood*, I enjoy its spacious nature and the confident and expansive soundstage it conjures up. Instruments are pushed far stage left and right, and Gabriel’s vocals hang in the middle with real confidence. In absolute terms the 6000A is a little two-dimensional when it comes to depth perspective, with a slight dip in stage depth, but it’s still capacious considering the price.

Switching between inputs, there is no obvious failing. Bluetooth is perhaps the least sonically convincing, of the bunch, but being decently implemented aptX it handles the signal well and sounds surprisingly engaging.

Conclusion

Audiolab’s 6000A is a cracking budget integrated with just the right amount of facilities, a snappy and engaging sound, sufficient power and fine build. A great buy for the modern music fan who wants plenty of flexibility. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Snappy, fun sound; decent power; good design

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Impressive integrated for audiophiles that are on a budget



Copland CTA408

Building components that use valves in its pre and power stages amp, but in combination with modern design practise in terms of circuits, layouts and materials, Copland's aim is to achieve previously unattainable levels of performance. The CTA408 is built around the KT150 valve, which is a 21st-century innovation and an evolution of the KT88, capable of delivering 70W as a single unit. Copland prefers to run its valves less than flat out and the CTA408 uses four to deliver a claimed 2x 75W of power between 3 and 8ohm. This is combined with a preamp that uses the same combination of 12BH7 and 12AY7 valves as its smaller CTA405. It provides four line-level inputs and a tape loop, joined by a phono stage that supports both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges via J-FETs and active RIAA equalisation. There are separate inputs for MM or MC cartridges and a 6.35mm headphone output socket is around the side and runs off a dedicated headphone amp.

Sound quality

With a claimed 2x 75W at its disposal, the CTA408 can work with a wider selection of speakers than you might expect of a valve amplifier. I start with Spondor's A1 standmount for its outstanding ability to reveal the basic attributes of whatever amp is used to drive it. Powered by the Copland, I notice a complete absence of warmth

or the 'bloom' that often accentuates the midrange with some designs. Instead, it delivers a performance that is big, confident and potent.

The wonderful dance hall vibe of Ibibio Sound Machine's *Tell Me (Doko Mien)* is reproduced with all of its rhythmic urgency intact. The first thing that really stands out about the performance is the bass response. Even via the diminutive Spondor there is a quite phenomenal low end that goes usefully deep, but it's the speed and definition that are really noteworthy. There is texture and agility that is extremely hard to wrong foot and it can be tasked with the reproduction of pretty much any music you can think of, delivering it with the prerequisite scale and authority.

Switching to my larger and rather trickier-to-drive Neat Momentum 4 floorstander, it powers its way through *Like Eating Glass* by Bloc Party with the sort of slam and attack that is not generally the preserve of vacuum tube designs. Listen a little longer and those hefty KT150s start to reveal some of the traits we associate with valves. There is a presence and immediacy to vocals that is just outstanding. It's never artificially over emphasised, but every rapid-fire syllable and inflection is right there effortlessly defined from the backing instrumentation. When you combine this with the considerable reserves of slam that it delivers to

material, you have a very enticing combination indeed.

The news gets even better with a 24/88.2 FLAC of Dead Can Dance's *Rakim*, which allows the Copland to show its considerable virtues all at once. The little details that make this such a spectacular recording – like the fractional echo of the soaring vocals – are perfectly captured in a way that seems deceptively easy until you listen to it on something else.

Conclusion

There may be aficionados that struggle to see the point of the Copland CTA408. It isn't a lush or cuddly performer and there are times when it sounds more solid state than many of its transistor-equipped rivals. What it is best seen as is a truly outstanding integrated that happens to use valves. Its ability to delight across a variety of music, combined with a real-world power output and useful selection of features make this a truly invigorating addition to the roll call of high-end integrated amps and demonstrates just how exceptional the vacuum tube can be in the hands of a company as talented as this one. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Copland CTA408

PRICE
£6,400

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
26kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 220 x 460mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 75W (8ohm)
- Output valves: 4x KT150
- Preamp valves: 2x 12BH7, 2x 12AY7
- Inputs: 4x stereo RCA's
- Dedicated MM and MC phono stage inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
absolutesounds.com

REVIEWED
HFC 450

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Balanced yet immediate performance; specification; build

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Bulk; remote handset is a little too directional

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

WE SAY: A top-flight integrated amplifier that's a valve-based masterpiece

OVERALL

★★★★★



Hegel H590

Rated at just over 300W per channel into 8ohm, it's really not unfair to think of Hegel's flagship design as a control freak that likes whatever loudspeaker is attached to do exactly as it's told. On paper it looks to be 20 percent more powerful than its closest sibling – the H360 – but when you appreciate that the power reserves can increase to around 2.2kW into tougher loads, it ranks as one of the most powerful integrations available.

The front panel is uncluttered with just a logo and clear white OLED display flanked by twin control knobs for source select and volume level. Inputs can also be cycled through using the purposeful metal remote that also controls volume as well as some digital playback. Where the front is spartan, the back bristles with connectivity with three RCA unbalanced inputs alongside twin balanced XLR ins and an extensive array of optical, coaxial, USB and network connections, as well as digital out and line level output options. The H590 enables AirPlay or Spotify Connect via its network input and will act as a media renderer with any suitably equipped UPnP/DLNA media player.

Sound quality

Playing *Work Work* by Clipping from the Tidal Masters streaming service via USB, the metallic chimes, samples and percussion are just mesmerising.

This track sparkles with detail. Vocals have extra body and presence and a real three dimensionality that lets you hear around the performance in a new way. Bass is properly deep and luscious with lashings of texture as it presses the lowest notes into every corner of my room without any sense of uncontrolled flab. This is a big track that can excite any space, but I get all the bass depth and muscle, without any extra fat. The chorus fills out a vast soundstage with such a spatial image I feel I could wander through the group and add a solo.

Shifting down a gear to *Love Will Tear Us Apart* by June Tabor on CD into one of the H590's analogue inputs, the acoustic guitar exquisitely conveys every tiny, fretted nuance and ringing harmonic detail. Tabor's breathy voice is completely compelling and utterly three dimensional, full of expressive texture yet without any dryness or grain. The H590 feels like it has more contrast, more resolving power, more light and shade and a richer palette of colours to mix from. A mournful cello is rich and soothing, yet I can also clearly hear the drawn bow rasp and resonate against the strings.

I return to the USB input and play a Tidal Masters file of the *Et Misericordia* from Kim André Arnesen's *Magnificat*. The strings have a gloriously warm, sonorous glow, while a lone piano feels further away and more plaintive in the cavernous acoustic space. The effortless soprano starts gently, the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Hegel H590
PRICE
£9,000
ORIGIN
Norway
TYPE
Integrated amplifier and DAC
WEIGHT
22kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 171 x 445mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x301W (8ohm)
• 32-bit/384kHz PCM/DSD256 DAC with MQA support
• Analogue inputs: 3x stereo RCAs; 2x stereo balanced XLRs
• Digital inputs: 1x BNC; 1x coaxial; 3x optical; 1x USB-B; 1x Ethernet port
• Outputs: 1x fixed stereo RCAs; 1x variable stereo RCAs; 1x digital BNC
DISTRIBUTOR
Hegel Music Systems
TELEPHONE
00 47 22605660
WEBSITE
hegel.com
REVIEWED
HFC 449

H590 sublimely capturing all the delicacy and sweetness of her phrasing. Her voice intertwines with the strings before soaring clear and high over the soloists, full of emotion and power. I turn up the volume as the choir joins in and the H590 rises to the challenge, effortlessly matching the dynamics without breaking a sweat. This is one of the most powerful, emotive and lush recordings I know and the H590 is able to match that power with its ability to present new levels of intimacy, transparency and communication with majestic scale and power. The result is as enchanting as it is breath taking.

Conclusion

The H590 is hugely powerful, but the power reserves are allied to total composure and the most sensitive signal handling to deliver the smallest, most subtle, dynamic details. Your speakers will probably sound better than ever before, but this is incredible quality control rather than sheer brute force. The H590 is destined to beat at the heart of many top-flight systems and as such must be considered one of the best integrated amplifiers at this or any price. **CW**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Limitless power and grip; effortlessly transparent; highly refined DAC

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: A flagship integrated amplifier that delivers everything you'd expect and so much more



Icon Audio Stereo 40 MkIV

A flexible, well-made integrated, the Stereo 40 MkIV really advances the budget valve amp cause. It's bristling with tweaky features, the most notable of which is that it can work with a range of output valves from EL34 to KT88 (including KT66/77/90, 6CA7 and 6550), so you can 'roll' valves for yourself to get the sound you want. It also offers a choice of Triode or Ultralinear operation; the former giving a claimed 30W RMS per channel and the latter 50W, with differing sonic characteristics. Other factory options include Shuguang Treasure valves and Jensen 'oil in paper' capacitors. There's a steel mesh valve cover to keep prying fingers out and a headphone socket for private listening.

Sound quality

The Stereo 40 MkIV's faults are easy enough to hear, but its easy charm means they don't seem to matter so much. Its key strength is power, and it comes across with plenty of confidence. It has a certain purposefulness to the way it makes music, underwritten by what is undoubtedly – for a budget valve amp – impressive loudspeaker driving ability. Not only can this deliver the power, but at highish volumes and on loud crescendos it makes it stick. It doesn't fall apart like some similarly priced valve designs when asked to push hard. There's no sense of the output transformers saturating too soon, for example.

Put on some bouncy techno such as Inner City's *Good Life*, and the bass synthesiser modulates up and down the lower octaves in a powerful and animated way. Flipping to Ultralinear operation gives it more wallop, but it also sounds flabbier and rhythmically less coherent, with a slightly more gritty midband and treble.

There are some valve amplifiers that are desperate to counter the stereotype of the breed by sounding fat and warm, but this isn't one of them. It's only subtly coloured, but you're never unaware of it. It takes the edge off dry, forward recordings or steely sounding speakers and with Squeeze's *Tempted* there's no harshness to the vocals and the hi-hat cymbal work is very sophisticated, while the electric organ sounds thick and full of body. Contrast that with some solid-state amps at the price – which can make the recording thin and tinselly – and the Icon Audio is hard not to like.

Rhythmically, music chugs along in a carefree way and there's no sense of it sounding forced or mechanical. Instead, you're struck by the sense of occasion; Rush's *Lakeside Park* is a simple rock recording, but the Icon Audio makes it sing. It's not open or dynamic, yet this amplifier just gets into the groove and lets the music's natural rhythm flood out. It's odd in a way because it doesn't sound especially fast – it's not as if you're wowed by its transient speed – and yet you still feel yourself getting pulled into the groove.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Icon Audio Stereo 40 MkIV

PRICE
£2,200

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
22kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
390 x 230 x 410mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 50W RMS (8ohm)
- Class A Triode front end, push pull output
- 4x KT88, 4x 6SN7 valves
- Inputs: 3x stereo RCAs; 1x tape loop

DISTRIBUTOR
Icon Audio

TELEPHONE
0116 2440593

WEBSITE
iconaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 450

The soundscape it produces sounds good too as it sets up a wide left-to-right soundstage with a cavernous feel. It's as if everything's gone through an effects processor, and is now in 'stereo wide' mode. Some classic rock from The Smiths sounds larger than I remember it; *The Headmaster Ritual* booms out of the speaker in a most enchantingly capacious way, when it can sound small and weedy. Inside that large stereo soundscape imaging is a little vague, but instruments have a good deal of space around them and aren't too subsumed by others.

Downsides? It still doesn't ultimately have the grunt of a good similarly priced transistor amplifier. Bass is a touch too loose, although it's still tuneful and sumptuous. Midband is coloured and low-level detail isn't all it could be, so don't buy this if you're looking for forensic neutrality.

Conclusion

The Stereo 40 MkIV is well made, good looking, highly tweakable, surprisingly powerful and delivers an engaging sound. It's a great-value package that should tempt even serious solid-state amp fans with its valve charms. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful; flexible; great sound per pound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Super value, highly flexible valve integrated amplifier

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Naim Nait XS 3

Since the original Nait was discontinued in the late eighties, the small integrated amp has gone through a number of incarnations before growing up into a fully fledged full-width design with a wide range of inputs and a balance control. For a couple of decades, the Nait has been a line level-only product, and has got ever slicker, more mainstream and less quirky with each incarnation.

The third-generation Nait XS 3 reverses that trend in two ways. Firstly, the company has carefully tweaked the circuit design to deliver a more classically 'musical' Naim sound. Secondly, it comes with a moving-magnet phono stage built-in – the first time the input has appeared since the classic Nait 3 of the mid-nineties.

It shares the full-width, slimline form factor of previous XS models and claims a rated power output of 2x 70W into 8ohm, unchanged from its XS 2 predecessor. A Class A headphone amplifier stage is also fitted and the power lead comes with Naim's special decoupled plug, which removes many of the mechanical vibrations travelling down the cable into the amp.

Sound quality

This is a clear improvement over its already fine predecessor. Take Chic's *Good Times*, for example. The Nait XS 3 turns in a well-defined, highly detailed and carefully ordered sound, but more than this, it really sings. Via

a line-level input, it shows a rhythmic dexterity missing on its predecessor. It's particularly good at carrying the dynamic inflections in the music, the subtle accenting in the playing that makes the song so engrossing. It is fast and agile, able to track dynamics far better than expected for the price.

The starting point for its musical skill is the bass; there was a time when Naim stood out from the crowd in its handling of this, but the house sound has got a little softer of late – not so here. When I spin up Beatmasters' *Rok Da House*, it's the combination of control, transient speed and power that really strikes – the Nait XS 3 is grippy and sinewy, with no spare fat, yet has real punch at high volumes. It shows little strain for something so small and is able to be the life and soul of any party.

The combination of synth bass, bass drum and vocals give this track real urgency and pace; the Naim grabs it and doesn't let go. Yet it is the control in the midband that really impresses; it separates out different strands of the mix as well as anything at this price. On Herbie Hancock's *Speak Like A Child* it delivers a vivid and engrossing rendition of this great jazz piece. Tonally it remains smoother and darker than early classic Nait, yet is obviously more vibrant and lively than its XS 2 predecessor. There is a better sense of sparkle to softly struck hi-hat cymbals, making for a more realistic and atmospheric sound.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Nait XS 3
PRICE
£2,200
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
8.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 70 x 314mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)
• Inputs: 4x stereo RCA; 5x DIN
• Moving-magnet phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01722 426600
WEBSITE
naimaudio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 454

Simon and Garfunkel's *America* is presented with a great deal of scale, being especially capacious from left to right, and shows a fair degree of stage depth too. In a sense, though, its character is such that you don't get hung up on lowly hi-fi considerations, because it's so good at whisking the listener deep into the musical event.

The built-in moving-magnet phono section is very good and I am amazed how much it unlocks from my prized vinyl. If anything, it rather perks up the sound; it sure catches the full majesty of Neil Young's *Ohio*. The recorded acoustic is full of detail and has a vibrancy and lovely spacious feel to this old analogue recording.

Conclusion

There's been a real sense that each successive generation of Naim's Nait integrated amplifiers has got stronger and more sophisticated, but not necessarily better. Each refresh has brought greater smoothness, poise and assuredness – yet with some of that intrinsic 'Naitness' missing. The Nait XS 3 changes that and delivers a far more engrossing sound than its already capable predecessor. **DP**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Engrossing sound; minimalist design; build; MM phono stage

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: The Nait strikes back!

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SOUND & VISION

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AWARDS 2019

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AWARDS 2019

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AWARDS 2019

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AWARDS 2019

Systems
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AWARDS 2019

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£299

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NAD
C 316BEE V2
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AWARDS 2018**

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Naim Supernait 3

This third-generation integrated amplifier is more turntable friendly than ever, but this is only one part of a bigger story

It's just over 12 years since Naim first released the original Supernait. It's a reflection of the times that the Supernait 3 has a different specification to its ancestor. The digital inputs and DAC of the original Supernait are gone and it's equipped with a moving-magnet phono stage, but this is far from the only area where things have changed.

At first glance, though, it's not obvious what those changes are because the headline specs don't look significantly different from its discontinued predecessors. Power output remains rated at 2x 80W into 8ohm – 2x 130W into 4 – and the general information given doesn't suggest a radical upgrade, but dig a little deeper and the design adjustments start to become clear.

The most notable change is the removal of the cascode stage in the output. This has been a feature of Naim integrated amplifier designs for a very long time, but thanks to carefully optimising the second stage gain transistors the need for it is eliminated and the amplifier stability is said to improve as a result. This means the slew rate – the change in the output voltage relative to the input – doubles and translates to a sonic improvement, says Naim.

This is partnered with further refinements to the power supply arrangements, which were already fairly extensive to begin with. The Supernait 3 has a larger transformer than before partnered with a 24V Discrete Regulator (DR) module to power the preamp section and in the Naim tradition, this can be

augmented with an external PSU. As with the Nait XS 3 (p72), the audio circuitry employs the same isolation techniques and chassis-mounted sockets hand wired to the boards.

The phono preamp is split into three stages: gain, passive equalisation and active equalisation. It features through-hole mounted film resistors for reduced noise and microphony. At the £3,500 asking price, the Supernait 3 does face rivals that offer a phono stage with moving-coil cartridge support, but it retains the power and signal DIN connection that enables it to be used with the company's StageLine (£400) or SuperLine (£2,550) external phono stages. In keeping with Naim tradition, line-level inputs are available via both RCA and DIN connections, while the MM phono stage input is stereo RCAs only. A Class A headphone amplifier with a 6.35mm front-panel socket is also fitted.

Aesthetically, the Supernait 3 is almost indistinguishable from its predecessor. Naim has developed some striking-looking components during the last few years, but its Classic Series has long been a watchword for tradition and consistency known for its high levels of build quality and features such as the Alps Blue Velvet volume control and on the back of the unit the 3.5mm IR input – enabling it to be

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Supernait 3

PRICE
£3,500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
14kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 87 x 314mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 80W (8ohm)
- Connections: 4x stereo RCA inputs; 2x DIN ins; 3x DIN in/outs
- Moving-magnet phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 456



controlled via the Naim app when partnered with a matching streamer – remain in place.

Sound quality

The Supernait 3 review sample slots straight into the space vacated by my resident Supernait 2 amplifier, which remains on hand to allow me to compare the two. My first impression is a performance that's immediately recognisable as being from a Naim product, although the changes introduced by the latest-generation model are even better than what's come before.

Where the Supernait 3 stands out as significantly different from both of its predecessors – and indeed almost any Naim device I've experienced before – is the amount of delicacy that's now on offer. A 24/96 download of Emily Barker's *Disappear* is a bare-bone recording that delivers the sense of musicians being in the room, thanks to the amp's ability to capture the nuances of the instruments and the arrangement of the performers that's beyond what I've come to expect from previous integrations. Not only are the strings of the violin and cello tonally rich and believable, but there is far more sense of the slurring movement from note to note.

Cumulatively, what the additional detail and spatial ability adds up to is a Naim amplifier that has a far

The design is classic Naim, but the performance is even better

greater ability to create a believable soundstage. The presentation has gently opened up with each Supernait incarnation, but up until now it has tended to sit between the speakers and deliver a focussed performance that feels fast and immediate. Now with the Supernait 3 it extends beyond the speakers and gives larger-scale music space to breathe.

What is vital, though, is that none of the sense of three dimensionality is at the expense of any of the virtues that made previous versions so enjoyable. Connected to my resident Neat Momentum 4i floorstanding loudspeaker, the Supernait 3 tears into the fury of Sturgill Simpson's *Best Clockmaker On Mars* – a 24/96 stream via Qobuz – in a manner that is entirely satisfying. The deep but controlled and detailed bass that starts and stops with absolute

This is a consistently talented and much less picky design than its predecessors

precision means that it always sounds utterly assured in a way that only a scant number of rivals can match.

And what of the built-in phono stage? Running via my GyroDec turntable fitted with a Nagaoka MP-200 moving-iron cartridge (HFC 434), the Naim gets all the basics right. Noise at idle is effectively non-existent and while Naim has set the phono stage circuit up for a 5mV input, there's no shortage of gain with the claimed 4mV output of the MP-200 meaning that it should handle all but the most anaemic of 'high-output' moving-coil designs. The grounding post at the rear is a little tricky to get to, but otherwise setup is completely straightforward.

The live performance of *Silent Alarm* by Bloc Party really benefits from the Supernait's newfound sense of space. The vast presence of the audience is readily perceivable and the placement of the band on the stage is recreated with an assurance that means you listen to the music rather than trying to discern what is going on. In absolute performance terms, attaching the company's StageLine phono stage to the powered input on the back will probably edge it, but the differences won't be significant and if the moving-magnet cartridge that you're using is in the £300 to £500 price range, I can't see anyone being anything but entirely happy with the Supernait 3's vinyl handling.

As a carry over from the preceding Supernait, the built-in headphone amp is good rather than great. Even with the relatively benign load of Audio-Technica's ATH-A2000Z headphone (HFC 412), there's not a huge amount of headroom and the sound tends to harden up when levels are higher. Used within its performance envelope it's a fast and invigorating listen, but it isn't ideal for more serious headphone listening. As a feature for occasional use it is up to the job, but more serious users might want to consider an external headphone amp such as Naim's own HeadLine design priced at £530.

In every other regard, though, this is a consistently talented and much less picky integrated amplifier design than its predecessors when it comes to partnering equipment and works just as happily driving Neat's Momentum 4i floorstander as it does Focal's Kanta N°1 standmount (HFC 454). How it performs with Bowers & Wilkins' 805 D3 standmount is the most telling, though, and demonstrates the tweaks made to the Supernait 3's power supply arrangements with an impressive amount of grip and drive applied to its handling of the speaker.

Conclusion

For similar money, there are rivals with higher claimed power outputs, but the Supernait 3 is unlikely to find itself at a disadvantage. It offers a useful set of connections in a chassis that is superbly finished and easy to accommodate. The truly brilliant aspect of the Supernait 3 is how it further evolves the Naim sound without feeling like there has been unnatural or wholesale change to what has appealed to listeners before. It still hits hard and goes like the clappers, but when you need a little more nuance, it effortlessly provides a high level of subtlety and is one of the most accomplished integrated amps I've heard and a true all-rounder. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Spacious and potent sound; superb build; phono stage

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Headphone amp lacks a little gain

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: An invigorating and exciting integrated amp that works very well with a variety of speaker designs

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Norma Audio

Revo IPA-70B

As Norma Audio's entry-level integrated amplifier, the Revo IPA-70B boasts 2x 70W into 8ohm power output and is claimed to deliver more than 1MHz of bandwidth, up to 100A of current and 1,000W peak power handling capability. This suggests not only some serious over engineering, but also a very dynamic performance.

Connectivity includes four line-level RCA inputs, one AV RCA in and an optional DAC module with a single USB input, although coaxial and optical inputs are notably absent. Alternatively, a modular phono stage can be specified.

A single button is used to cycle through inputs and the central volume dial can be turned manually or remote controlled with course or fine adjustment via the comprehensive yet chic all-metal handset.

Sound quality

Playing *Flash* by Cigarettes After Sex on CD is insightful. The dark acoustic is vast and deep with rimshots reverberating off into infinity as a sonorous keyboard glows warmly against the inky blackness. The depth of the soundstage is notable, confirming very sensitive signal handling that can preserve the most subtle of musical nuances. Treble is extended and sweet, feeling grainless yet never sounding like it might be smoothing over detail. Every musical detail is laid out with effortless authority. Bass

is full and wholesome while preserving a languid liquidity. Some might prefer it tighter and faster with more punch, but this sounds like a real instrument played by a real person. Vocals appear centre stage, dripping with emotive detail. Sensitive inflections are communicated superbly and the amp has an amazing ability to resolve tiny textural detail in three dimensions without sounding fatiguing.

Swapping to an HDCD rendition of *Rain Rain Rain* by Roxy Music, the opening keyboards are big, fulsome and brassy, perfectly capturing the synthesised sounds. The drumming is almost holographic as every beat and stroke bristles with lilting, syncopated detail that places the kit perfectly in the mix. There is a naturalness and flow that feels addictive, balancing explicit detail with silky smoothness while delivering the essential drive and momentum of the track. The wonderfully burbling bassline is supple, weaving in and out with total agility, yet pressing into my listening room with real presence. Ferry's voice is sublime; gravelly and textured yet sultry and warm. This amp clearly has a talent for vocals and other complex acoustic instruments. There is a kind of projection to performers where you can perceive more realistic air around them. All the detail and accuracy is there, but it's sweet, fluid and feels almost alive.

Playing *Beim Schlafengehen* by Richard Strauss and sung by Jessye

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Norma Audio
Revo IPA-70B

PRICE
£4,160

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 75 x 350mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)
- 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
- Inputs: 4x stereo RCA; 1x stereo RCA (AV); 1x USB port
- Optional MM/MC phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
HiFidelity Ltd.

TELEPHONE
07787 056723

WEBSITE
hifidelityuk.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 455

Norman via my Macbook Pro plugged into the DAC input, the opening strings growl and grow with dark menace, full of vibrant texture and melancholic yearning. Norman's soprano voice gently rises up gaining strength and shape until fully formed high above the lush orchestra. Again, the Revo IPA-70B performs the impossible trick of communicating precise vocal phrasing and rich detail around dense and complex instrumentation, yet also giving the performers space and room to flow and breathe. Norman's voice has immense power on certain phrases and this is precisely where I can tell that provision of extremely generous current delivery and potent peak power ensures the three-dimensional picture doesn't flatten or harden up.

Conclusion

The Revo IPA-70B is a class act. Where some higher end amps tend towards harsh resolution and raw power, it focuses on greater insight and stronger expression. There is a shade more contrast, a hint more sweet detail and a tad more colour, all adding up to a great deal more presence and enjoyment from one's music. **CW**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Highly communicative sound with sweet treble; design and build

DISLIKE: Understated styling; USB-only DAC

WE SAY: An effortlessly musical and truly engaging integrated





Quad Vena II

At first glance it's hard to see exactly what has changed from the original Vena. The little amplifier still comes in Quad's understated Lancaster grey as standard, with optional wood sleeves in a choice of sapele mahogany veneer (pictured), or gloss black or white lacquer for £100 extra. Front controls remain reminiscent of classic Quad products of yore, but inside the changes are more marked. Both digital and analogue sections are revised and the Cirrus Logic DAC chip is replaced by the ES9018K2M DAC. This pushes the Vena II's digital compatibility all the way up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256 when connected to a computer via USB. The other digital inputs – two optical and one coaxial – remain limited to 24-bit/192kHz.

While the same Quad-designed Class AB amplification found in the original remains, it's now powered by a new 200VA toroidal transformer with generous reservoir capacity downstream of it, designed to enhance the amp's grip and dynamic ability.

Also new is a low-noise JFET-based moving-magnet phono stage, while there's a dedicated headphone amp using current-feedback circuitry for better dynamics and detail. The specification is completed by Bluetooth supporting aptX and AAC, and two line-level inputs in addition to the phono in, while outputs run to a single pair of speaker binding

posts, optical and coaxial digital, a set of pre outs should you want to add a power amp and a compact remote handset for the usual functions.

Sound quality

The new version is comprehensively better than the amp it replaces, which was itself no slacker. Bass is tighter and better defined, offering decent extension, while the greater punch and dynamic ability is as much about detail and speed as all-out slam and the ability to play loud cleanly. If the original succeeded by not sounding anything like a small amplifier, the second-generation model takes that to a new level, making it an ideal hub for a stylish system even if you're not limited for space.

Quad offers a 'serving suggestion' for the Vena II, combining it with a pair of its compact S1 standmount loudspeakers (HFC 404) in black ash as a System Pack selling for £999, but based on the performance it puts in in my listening room this amplifier is more than good enough to be used with more ambitious speaker choices. For a while I run it into Neat's excellent Iota Xplorer floorstander (HFC 435), having already heard it performing well with the same company's tiny original Iota in 'desktop audio' mode.

Tabletop audio is an application to which the Vena II's dimensions make it very well suited, but despite its seemingly modest 45W per channel

into 8ohm power output claim, it's more than capable of delivering a big, room-filling sound, whether that be from vinyl, other analogue sources or a digital feed.

Playing the free-flowing one-take-recorded *Raizes* set from Breno Viricimo in DSD256 downloaded from nativesd.com, the Quad does a fine job with the detail and air of the music, giving the bass natural weight and snap while letting the percussion patter away behind the lead guitar. And when one comes back into the real world with a CD-quality recording such as the massive *After The Flood* from Talk Talk's 1991 *Laughing Stock* album, the Vena II's combination of persuasive clout and detail retrieval takes you right into the heart of the textures of the track to magical effect.

Conclusion

With a comprehensive specification that moves Quad's most compact integrated amplifier on and enough weight to bring any type of music to life so thrillingly, the Vena II continues to show that it really is something a little extra special. **JP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Quad Vena II

PRICE
From £650

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier/DAC

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
301 x 95 x 313mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 45W (8ohm)
• Digital inputs: 2x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x USB-B; aptX Bluetooth
• Analogue inputs: 2x RCAs; 1x MM phono stage
• Outputs: 1x optical digital; 1 coaxial digital; stereo pre; 6.35mm headphone socket

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 452561

WEBSITE
quad-hifi.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 448

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Flexibility; dynamic, detailed sound; subdued style

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Optional finishes are a bit glitzy

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Quad's fine little amplifier now sounds bigger and better, while adding extra features, too

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Rogue Audio Cronus Magnum III

As the only all-valve integrated in Rogue Audio's range, the Cronus Magnum III uses a quartet of KT120 valves. These are fairly powerful and are able to deliver 60W of output power so the four here are being run relatively conservatively to generate a claimed power output of 100W into 8ohm, meaning it's capable of driving the majority of modern loudspeakers.

There are four inputs, three line-level and one phono stage input all via stereo RCA connections. The phono stage is comprehensive with gain settings for both moving-magnet and coil cartridges, together with load adjustment to make partnering MC options a little simpler. The phono stage is an entirely solid-state design as is the company's Triton II MM/MC phono (HFC 447), which received a recommended badge for its rich and engaging sound. An additional useful feature is the headphone amplifier stage. This is also solid state and is built around MOSFETs, so it can deliver a claimed power output of 2W.

Sound quality

This is unquestionably a valve amp in the way it performs and thanks to the power in reserve, it has a level of drive and authority that gives it traits you might more commonly associate with solid-state designs.

The 24/96 Qobuz stream of The National's *You Had Your Soul With You* demonstrates this to wonderful effect.

Voices leap out of the mix, not because there is any unnatural emphasis to them, but simply as they are startlingly vivid. There is an effortless three-dimensionality to the music with the relationship between the performers feeling utterly self explanatory. As I close my eyes, the music is happening in a meaningful fashion right in front of me.

Some of this vitality stems from the headroom available. With 100W on tap and enviable reserves of current to back them up, the presentation feels effortlessly muscular. At anti-social levels things harden up slightly, but for more normal use it delivers even large-scale and dynamic recordings without any constraint. This ensures that all the desirable valve amp attributes continue to be present at levels that are far in excess of what you might normally expect.

The punch and timing on offer is deeply impressive for an amp of any topology at the price, let alone one that is delivering upper registers with the sweetness of this one. Switch to the stark, savage electronica of Helena Hauff's *Qualm* and the Rogue is simply outstanding. The fizzing, crackling bass line is delivered with authority and perfect snap and drive.

Magic Sam's *I Feel So Good (I Wanna Boogie)* is effortlessly funky. He is no longer an element of the recording, but a tangible entity at the front of the soundstage with his impetus driving the music on. Combined with

a top end that sympathetically deals with the slightly ragged treble of this legendary recording, the result makes for a compelling listen.

The moving-magnet phono stage is also very talented. It presents Marina's *Soft To Be Strong* with its customary vividness. Diamandis' perfect vocal turn is incredibly dynamic and vivid and is underpinned by a bass weight that is never less than convincing. All the basics are well handled too with a pleasant absence of noise at idle and decent resistance to surface noise.

The headphone amplifier is clearly more than an afterthought. The presentation isn't quite as effortlessly real as it is via the speaker outputs, but it is a very entertaining and engaging listen all the same.

Conclusion

This is one of the most compelling sonic performers available at this price. By combining a real-world power output with considerable care and attention to detail, the result is a truly wonderful amplifier that should have wider appeal than just typical valve customers. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rogue Audio
Cronus Magnum III

PRICE
£3,000

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Integrated
amplifier

WEIGHT
25kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
457 x 171 x 444mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 100W (8ohm)
• Output valves: 4x KT120
• Preamp valves: 2x 12AX7 and 3x 12AU7
• Inputs: 3x stereo RCAs
• MM/MC phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
Divine Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
07918 728860

WEBSITE
divineaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 451

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Vivid, lively and entertaining sound; flexible spec; build

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Fiddly setup; vulnerable valve placement; protective cage optional

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

WE SAY: Sparkling performance that matches great spec with solid build quality

OVERALL

★★★★★



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August 2019

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Auralic Altair G1

Designed to be more of a standalone front end than some of its other products, Auralic's Altair is specified a little differently to its G1 brethren. As well as a UPnP streaming module that can be used wired or wirelessly, it offers four digital inputs; an optical, coaxial, USB and AES, that can be outputted as a line-level signal or adjusted by the built-in volume control to allow it to function as a preamp.

As well as a USB-A port on the rear that can accept a hard drive, the Altair G1 has an internal bay for a 2.5in drive, allowing it to function as a complete digital player with built-in library. The reason why this is so useful is that the Lightning control interface is able to act as its own server, rendering the music library pretty much indistinguishable from using a good-quality external server.

The Altair G1 uses an ESS9038Q2M DAC of a slightly lower spec than the more costly one found in the Vega (opposite) and forgoes the ORFEO Class A output module and jitter reducing technology – although it does retain the femto clock, which is something of an Auralic speciality.

Sound quality

The 16/44.1 rip of Robert Plant's *Monkey* has a propulsive energy that engages on an emotional level. It combines this with an outstanding performance across the midrange. Plant's vocals are rich and beautifully

defined while his relationship with the supporting instrumentation is very well judged. This balance of richness and energy can be further tweaked with the adjustable filters. After a little experimentation, I find that the Dynamic setting helps to keep higher tempo material sounding light on its feet.

There are other digital sources at similar price points that might beat the Auralic in terms of bass depth, but such is the togetherness of the performance, I suspect that most people won't care. This effortless cohesion allows complex material like The Cinematic Orchestra's *Ode To The Big Sea* to flow where some rivals falter. The interlude with overlapped drum kits is a test of any device's timing and the Altair passes with ease.

With a 24/96 rip of Mark Knopfler's *Dream Of The Drowned Submariner* the tonality feels gracefully right. Knopfler's vocals are wholly convincing and have a richness and vibrancy that grabs and holds the attention. The Altair is also usefully forgiving of less than stellar recordings. The 24/96 of Nirvana's *Come As You Are* is raw as it should be, but never feels too hard or aggressive.

The Altair G1 does its volume adjustment entirely in the digital domain and the result is a beautifully linear 100-step volume with enough fine adjustment to let you select exactly the level you want rather than something approximating to it. There

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Altair G1

PRICE
£1,900

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Streamer with preamp

WEIGHT
6.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm

FEATURES
• Supports sample rates up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512
• Wired and wireless networking
• Digital inputs: 1x USB-B port; 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 1x AES
• Streaming support: Spotify Connect; Tidal; Qobuz; internet radio
• Roon compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 455

is no discernible change to the basic tonal balance at any level and it feels like the preamp functionality is integral to the design rather than there as an afterthought. If you don't need analogue inputs, partnering it with a power amp or active speakers could result in a highly capable setup.

The inclusion of AirPlay means sending extra streaming services to the Altair is completely straightforward and sounds entirely in keeping with the performance via a network. In a perfect world, it would be partnered with Chromecast, but given that the Altair G1 supports lossless services via both Lightning and Roon, there is less pressure for it to be present than there might otherwise be.

Conclusion

The Altair might not be able to match the effortlessness of the Vega G1, but given the price difference it is closer than you'd expect. Auralic has tweaked the spec and the result is a product that offers pretty much everything you need and little that you don't, making it one of the best, if not *the* best streaming front ends that you can buy for under £2,000. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

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★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

★★★★★

LIKE: Wonderfully balanced sonics; good spec; well made

DISLIKE: Fractional lack of bass weight; no USB output or Chromecast

WE SAY: A capable and entertaining streamer that works well in a variety of systems

OVERALL

★★★★★



Auralic Vega G1

While Auralic's G1 and G2 Aries transports (HFC 431 and 441 respectively) will work with a huge selection of DACs, Auralic would prefer you choose its own decoding and the Vega G1 is the matching option for its Aries G1 streaming transport. As with any DAC, the Vega takes the digital signal from the back of the Aries and turns it into an analogue output signal to be connected to an amp. It has wired networking only via an Ethernet port at the rear and digital inputs include a USB-B port, AES, coaxial and optical connections. Stereo analogue outputs come via RCA and XLR sockets and there are two 6.35mm headphone sockets on the front panel.

It features 1GB of DDR RAM and a quad-core processor partnered with an ESS Sabre DAC supporting PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512.

Sound quality

Starting with a 16/44.1 rip of Yazz Ahmed's *Jamil Jamal* gives a good overview of what the Vega G1 is capable of with a very well-judged balance between detail and an extremely vivid presentation that never tips over into sounding bright or overly forward, even when the recording isn't great. Some of these traits can be identified as being down to the presence of that ESS Sabre DAC, which possesses a definite character of its own but there is also a tonal richness that continuously

makes its presence felt. Ahmed's trumpet is wonderfully vibrant and convincing with a notable decay to notes that delivers impressive detail.

The 24/48 remaster of Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer* has the scale it needs to sound right and has an excellent level of definition. The bass is pronounced without dominating and there is enough propulsive force to ensure it engages the listener. Compared with some rivals that last ounce of rhythmic excitement isn't present, but this is something that could probably be achieved with some prudent system matching.

It would be wrong to say the Auralic has no character of its own, but it comes across as determined to give you the contents of any recording with as little of itself included as possible. Although it offers a series of adjustable filters, these do not hugely alter the overall performance and I enjoy the consistently agreeable presentation of Precise, which appears to be the default setting.

Moving to the range of supported streaming services doesn't really alter this balance of realism and transparency – serving instead as a reminder that this section of the Lightning app is very slick indeed. Streaming The Cinematic Orchestra's album *To Believe* – which benefits from a 24/48 release via Qobuz – sounds sumptuous. There's a wonderful coherence to the way *A Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* has a

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Vega G1

PRICE
£3,300

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Streaming DAC
with preamp

WEIGHT
7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm

FEATURES
• Supports sample rates up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512
• Wired Ethernet networking
• Digital inputs: 1x USB-B port; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
• Streaming support: Spotify Connect; Tidal; Qobuz; internet radio
• Roon compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 449

remarkably open and three dimensional presentation.

As with the Aries models, the Vega can be used as an end point for Roon's playback software. It has a dedicated product profile, which automatically selects the relevant settings, and can be controlled over Ethernet via the Roon app. In the Aries models this feels a little superfluous, but here it works just beautifully. If you aren't planning on using the Vega G1 DAC alongside an Aries G1, Roon is a transformative experience because it lets the Vega demonstrate its excellent sonic performance while enjoying the control experience of Roon.

Conclusion

Despite its impressive DAC and streaming capabilities, the Vega G1 is a specialist solution. Even though it has one of the best apps around, the lack of Lightning Server support and wireless networking is likely to rule out some buyers. Nevertheless, its playback capabilities, coupled with excellent functionality and extremely solid build means that it can more than hold its own. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Even and consistently engaging performance; build

DISLIKE: No Lightning server support; price

WE SAY: A streaming DAC with bags of finesse that should fit into a variety of systems with ease



Cambridge Audio Edge NQ/W

CA's ambitious Edge streaming preamp and power amp combination come together to form a considerable bargain

Designed to commemorate Cambridge Audio's 50th anniversary, the three-strong Edge range of higher end components sticks with the brand's value-for-money feel but at a more premium price. The Edge NQ streaming preamplifier and Edge W stereo power amplifier here are the two mainstays of the range and substantial resources have been invested to get things right— not just in the audio circuitry but also styling, ergonomics and build. The Edge components feel swisher and more substantial than the company's standard products, conferring a sense

of quality as well as sporting a sparse, minimalist fascia. The question is: is the packaging good enough to cause badge-conscious buyers to buy into the new range?

The Edge NQ is packed with features that make it less of a preamp and more of a digital hub that happens to play analogue sources should you wish. Cambridge Audio's technical director Dominic Baker declined to mention which type of DAC is built in but it runs from up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and is DSD256-capable, which is accessible via its aptX Bluetooth input or its optical, coaxial or USB inputs. It has network streaming built in, plus

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge Audio Edge NQ

PRICE
£3,500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Network music player/DAC/preamplifier

WEIGHT
10.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
460 x 120 x 405mm

FEATURES
• 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256-capable DAC
• Digital inputs: 2x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x USB-B; HDMI
• Analogue inputs: 2x RCA; 1x balanced XLRs
• Chromecast; AirPlay; aptX Bluetooth; Spotify Connect; Google Play; internet radio

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio Partnership PLC

TELEPHONE
0845 9001230

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 447

Chromecast, AirPlay, Spotify Connect, Google Play and internet radio, all via the Edge Remote app. There are three analogue inputs, including one pair of balanced XLRs as well as three digital inputs – one coaxial and two optical – and a USB-B port and HDMI with an Audio Return Channel – meaning you can connect your TV and hear the audio through the hi-fi. Aside from the omission of a phono stage input, you can hook up almost anything.

Its unique user interface has a nice action and works intuitively with the hi-res display to give volume control and icon-based source selection. A remote is included, but you'll need to install the app on your smartphone or tablet to work the NQ properly.

The Edge W power amplifier offers a claimed 100W RMS per channel of power at 8ohm, and twice that into 4. Despite being a vast behemoth that looks closer to an American super-fi power amp costing 10 times its price, it has been designed with just 14 components in the signal path, says Dominic Baker. Much of its weight comes from the chunky aluminium casework, complete with large heatsinks on either side of the case and twin toroidal transformers designed to cancel out the other's electromagnetic interference. Round the back, there are beefy speaker wire terminals, a choice of switchable RCA



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge Audio
Edge W

PRICE
£2,500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Stereo power
amplifier

WEIGHT
23.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
460 x 150 x 405mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power
output: 2x 100W
RMS (8ohm)
• Inputs: 1x RCAs;
1x balanced XLRs
• Twin power
transformers
• Auto power-off
facility

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio Partnership
PLC

TELEPHONE
0845 9001230

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 447

or XLR inputs and even a handy auto-power off control. It's built and finished very well, which explains the not inconsiderable weight – and comes with much-needed heatsink fin protectors, which are essential to use when removing it from the case to stop any injury to your hands.

Install is easy enough, providing you take things slowly and methodically. Weighing 24kg, the bulk of the power amplifier is the main issue and you don't want to be moving it around if you can help it. The preamplifier is easy to set up using the Edge Remote app to remotely do a firmware update and then rebooting the first time you plug it in; this takes around five minutes. Once up and running it's

Edge sets a new performance bar for Cambridge Audio's offerings

very nice to use, even if it doesn't quite have the slickness of some high-end components I've seen.

Sound quality

Starting with the analogue inputs via a dCS Debussy DAC, the duo is impressive. There's a sense of easy confidence that you don't normally hear from products at this price, a feeling that the amplifier walks softly but carries a big stick. There's oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker, and no sign of the Edge W puffing at high volumes. Tonally it's a straight-laced combination; it's not especially warm or euphonic, yet you would never call it cold and harsh. Instead it sits close to neutral, with just a hint of a sweetness. Rhythmically, it has a fleet-of-foot character, being fast and engaging if not absolutely the most athletic around. One attractive facet is everything is well integrated with no sense of the bass dragging its feet. It's also good spatially, with a cavernous sound that's hard not to be impressed by.

Cue up Rush's *Take A Friend*, and it shows its physical presence. It has large reserves of punching power to handle even the most hard-to-drive speaker. The song's bassline is fast and fluid, and the Edge combo carries it with a lot of weight, along with a sense of ease that comes by not having to try too hard. The music sounds gutsy and full-bodied, yet there's no bass boom or any sense of the amp sounding unbalanced.

With Supertramp's *Take The Long Way Home*, the tonal balance gets brighter and more forward. The obvious contrast between the two recordings shows the NQ/W's lack of coloration and transparency. It remains studiously neutral regardless of material, managing to step aside and let the music do the talking.

David Bowie *Let's Dance* shows how fast, lithe and agile it is rhythmically speaking and I can easily hear the

woodblock percussion playing along, and how this is a counterpoint to the tight, fast-attack, quick-release drum sound. At the same time, Bowie uses keyboard bass in parts of this track and electric bass guitar in others, and the Edge combo is agile enough to show which is which. Indeed, the reverb on the track's great Stevie Ray Vaughan guitar solo is clear to hear along with the brilliant rhythmic gait of his playing. The NQ/W offers both impressive amounts of detail, as well as the vital ability to string it all together in a musically coherent way.

Via its internal DAC and streamed from my Western Digital NAS drive, the Edge pre/power serves up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic from Kate Bush's *Snowflake* in 24/96 WAV format. This is immersive stuff, as I bask in the intricacy and vibrancy of the close-miked piano. Her voice

It remains studiously neutral, stepping aside to let the music do the talking

hovers over this ethereally, located with precision in the recorded acoustic.

A DSD stream of Simple Minds' *Oh Jungleland* shows a similarly huge, expansive sound, and this works with the Edge W's massive punch to deliver a vast 'stadium' effect. There is even a taste of this via the aptX Bluetooth input, which turns in an engaging rendition of Nu Era's *Oscar Styles*. Rich, vibrant and bouncy, it's riotously good fun.

Conclusion

Cambridge Audio has surpassed itself with the Edge NQ/W combination. It's lovely to look at, nice to use and is packed with features, too. It sounds seriously good for the money, with a happy, upbeat nature underwritten by real power and insight. **DP**



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: EDGE NQ

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Clean, direct, enjoyable sound; connectivity

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: No phono stage input

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WE SAY: Versatile modern preamp with bags of style and great build at the price

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT: EDGE W

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Punchy, confident sound; detail and focus

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

WE SAY: Classy yet gutsy solid-state power amplifier

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



Audiolab 6000N Play

AS THE LATEST addition to the entry-level 6000 Series, the 6000N Play has a built-in ESS Sabre ES9018K2M DAC, pair of digital outputs – one coaxial, one optical – and a USB-B port. Rather than develop its own operating system, Audiolab has incorporated DTS Play-Fi. As well as the ability to stream from a physical library of music at PCM resolutions up to 24-bit/192kHz (DSD is not supported), there is an excellent spread of integrated streaming services including Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify, Amazon Music and Apple Music with some less well-known options making up the numbers.

Sound quality

The way the 6000N Play delivers Radiohead's 24/96 *OKNOTOK* remaster of *OK Computer* is understated but accomplished.

Thom Yorke's vocal in *No Surprises* is placed centre stage in the mix with supporting instruments perfectly located behind him. More than anything, it sounds fundamentally right.

On first listen, you might feel that compared with some other streamers, the 6000N Play feels almost gentle in the way that it delivers Lissie's *Why You Runnin'*, but while it isn't adding any impetus of its own, it never loses any of the funkiness that underpins the music. It also means that when you really don't want a surging intensity to the music, such as with Nils Frahm's lovely *Wintermusik*, the presentation is simply gorgeous.

Playing the edgy and compressed *Echo Park* by Feeder, it loses none of the intensity of the album but still

does a fine job handling the worst excesses of its production. If anything, the bass response is even more impressive. This isn't the most seismic performance and there are a number of similarly priced rivals with a little more punch, but the integration and tonality is consistently impressive, never dominating the upper registers while avoiding leaving the performance feeling lightweight.

On balance, performance is good enough to overlook the foibles of DTS Play-Fi. It might not be as slick as some we've seen, but the 6000N Play is still the best-sounding streamer under £500, balancing realism with refinement and engagement. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab
6000N Play

PRICE
£450

TELEPHONE
01480 452561

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 453

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Lindemann Limetree Network

UNLIKE THE LIMETREE Bridge (HFC 452), which is designed to attach to a digital input, the Limetree Network is a completely self-contained music streamer with built-in DAC and stereo RCA analogue outputs. There are no digital output options but there is a USB-A port, which as well as supporting an external hard drive can also hook up to a USB CD drive. Wi-fi and aptX Bluetooth wireless connectivity are also supported.

It can decode any audio signal up to 24-bit/384kHz or DSD to DSD256 or upsample all incoming audio signals to DSD256 prior to decoding.

Sound quality

Any purchasing decision is a question of balancing the fact the Limetree offers less connectivity and features than some rivals in a trade-off with performance. The good news is its

performance puts the Network right at the top of the tree for a sub-£1,000 streamer. Connected to a Naim Supernait 2 integrated and running with no upsampling engaged, it has a tonal balance that delivers a performance that is lively and energetic as well as being exceptionally refined. Feeder's *Buck Rogers*, a track that hovers on the edge of being over bright, is delivered with a controlled top end that makes for a satisfying listen and doesn't rob it of any of its energy. The bass response in particular is a wonderful balance of depth, detail and speed.

The tonality is also extremely good both with voices and instruments. David Gilmour's *On An Island* sounds unfailingly accurate, but sweet and engaging at the same time. The Network does its best work with decent recordings and clearly reveals how exceptional they are. This is no less

true with streaming services, and the 24-bit/96kHz version of Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner* is a fabulously involving listen as a result.

Switching DSD conversion on doesn't result in night-and-day differences, but it's worth doing. The overall tonality doesn't change significantly, but there are gains to the space around the presentation and the three dimensionality of the performance. With larger and more complex recordings like the live version of Public Service Broadcasting's *Gagarin* there's an order and cohesion that shows the piece off in its best light, and highlights exceptional levels of realism. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Lindemann
Limetree Network

PRICE
£900

TELEPHONE
01334 570666

WEBSITE
eliteaudiouk.com

REVIEWED
HFC 454

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

SOTM

sMS-200 Neo

SOUTH KOREAN COMPANY
SOTM (Soul Of the Music), has removed built-in control software, from the sMS-200 Neo, making it a network interface that will work with DNLA and UPnP protocols using its dedicated ARM processor board for streaming. It has no audio signal decoding of its own and uses a USB Audio port to output to an add-on USB DAC.

Installation is a little more involved than most network players, but its small size means it can be easily hidden away out of sight. There's no wireless connectivity so you'll need a wired connection for it to work.

Sound quality

I run the sMS-200 Neo as a standard DNLA server and connect it to Chord Electronics' Mojo headphone amp/DAC (HFC 405) into a Naim Supernait 2 integrated and Neat Momentum 4

speaker. As might be expected, performance is almost entirely governed by the Mojo DAC, but there are some subtle influences that are introduced by the SOTM. Comparing it with the Mojo's dedicated Poly wireless network streamer (HFC 431), it delivers a rendition of Jackson Browne's *Running On Empty* that feels more spacious and three dimensional, possibly due to the lower noise floor. The jumble of noises at the start of the title track – including shouts from the audience – are believable and at the price the SOTM and Mojo DAC makes for a tempting home option.

Swapping the Mojo for Chord's Hugo 2 headphone amp/DAC (HFC 428) and with the DNLA set for Roon, the SOTM's performance steps up a gear. Roon sees the Hugo 2 as the decoding device to both the Roon Core interface and the iPad app.



Again, the sound is largely dictated by the Hugo 2, but there is a sense of order and three dimensionality that goes beyond that of simply connecting my laptop directly to the Chord DAC and running Roon. Air's *So Light Is Her Footfall* takes on a more effortless and almost liquid quality as a result.

SOTM's sMS-200 Neo might be something of a niche solution, but it provides a very cost-effective way of turning a USB DAC into a streamer and does so with sufficient quality to be a partner for products that cost considerably more than it does. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
SOTM sMS-200 Neo
PRICE
£450
TELEPHONE
01334 570666
WEBSITE
eliteaudiouk.com
REVIEWED
HFC 449

OUR VERDICT



Volumio

Primo

VOLUMIO IS A complete operating system designed to be run on devices such as a Raspberry Pi. Primo represents the first dedicated hardware for the platform that's installed on an ASUS Tinkerboard – a single-board computer built around an ARM processor running Linux – and offers hefty decoding horsepower combined with an ESS ES9028Q2M DAC to enable it to handle PCM audio files up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512. It's supported by AirPlay and aptX Bluetooth, making it competitive with similarly priced rivals.

Sound quality

Stags Bellow by Martha Tilston has an almost liquid quality to its midrange that is wholly engaging. The balance between tonal accuracy and genuine emotion is extremely well judged. You never feel that

you're listening to an embellished take on the music, but equally this is more than a warts-and-all-style presentation.

The crunching low end of UNKLE's *Ar.Mour* is delivered as a force to the chest and even with its relatively slow tempo it feels energetic and exciting. Ask for something faster like Bloc Party's *Like Eating Glass* and the Primo displays wonderful energy. The rapid-fire drum work positively fizzles with excitement and it's hard not to be completely drawn into the music.

Hi-res material also presents no issue and the Primo really reaps the benefits of well-mastered recordings. It thunders through the 24/96 download of Led Zeppelin's *Presence* with an effortlessness that is unusual for a piece of affordable digital hardware. There is the option to



handle DSD natively or via DoP (DSD over PCM) and the former sounds very good with Depeche Mode's *Ultra* doing a fine job of avoiding any sense of there being hardware present. It isn't possible to do a side-by-side test with Auralic's *Group Test*-winning Aries Mini (HFC 442), but I think it would be a very close-run thing.

Out of the box, Primo's interface isn't as intuitive as some, but there's no question that if you put some time into its considerable customisation options it is capable of becoming a powerful music management tool. When you consider the flexibility and outstanding sonic performance on offer, the Volumio Primo looks like a very attractive option at the price. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Volumio Primo
PRICE
£412
WEBSITE
volumio.org
REVIEWED
HFC 450

OUR VERDICT





NAD

M10

This BluOS multi-room compact music system sounds every bit as good as it looks and is the design to beat

The arrival of a complete 'just add speakers' system in the BluOS family is something of a no-brainer – after all, the lineup from Canadian parent company Lenbrook already includes the Bluesound range of servers, players and speakers, and the availability of BluOS-compatible amplifiers and receivers from NAD.

It would probably have been enough for NAD to fill this gap with a simple system closer to the Bluesound range than its upmarket Masters pre/power amps, but it has a reputation for doing the unexpected, all the way back to its sector-defining 3020 amplifier of four decades ago. So the model it chose to launch is not just part of the Masters series, but also a thing of beauty and a remarkable piece of hi-fi in its own right.

That's something that becomes apparent as soon as you set eyes on its half-width design, placing it in direct competition with the Naim Uniti Atom and Linn's Selekt DSM. There may be styling cues from the company's Masters range of heavyweight pre and power amps, but the eye is inexorably drawn to the M10's display, dwarfing its rivals in all its crisp, colourful wonderfulness.

At rest, the panel is blank, contributing to its cool, black minimalism, with nothing much to show beyond an illuminated NAD logo on the top cover. However, as a hand approaches it springs to life, revealing not just sharp, clean cover art for whatever is playing, but also a full control interface, available via touchscreen functionality. Reach for the M10 while listening to music,

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NAD M10

PRICE
£2,200

ORIGIN
Canada/China

TYPE
Network music system

WEIGHT
5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 100 x 260mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x100W (4/8ohm)
- 32-bit/384kHz-capable DAC
- Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 1x HDMI; 1x USB-A
- Analogue inputs: 2x stereo RCA's
- Analogue outputs: 1x stereo preamp; 2x subwoofer

DISTRIBUTOR
Sevenoaks Sound and Vision

TELEPHONE
01732 740944

WEBSITE
nadelectronics.com;
sevenoakssound
andvision.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 451

and the sensor switches into control mode, ready for you to make adjustments. It's all simple, logical, and very clever.

But then that's the hallmark of this chic little NAD system, which is one of the best-realised examples of its genre, with its industrial design courtesy of New Jersey-based DF-ID; under founder David Farrage. And to complement that sharp set of togs, the M10 comes fully loaded with a very comprehensive suite of useful features and capabilities.

As you'll already have gathered, there's BluOS compatibility so it can integrate with all the products using that protocol to share hi-res music round the home, all under the control of a slick iOS/Android app on a smartphone or tablet. With the app in place and your handheld device connected to your home network, you never actually need to touch the M10 in everyday use. Which is a bonus given that I suspect that big display will quickly get a bit smeary.

Courtesy of NAD/Bluesound distributor Sevenoaks Sound and Vision, I have a Bluesound Vault 2i music server/ripper to hand to feed the M10 music, but it will work just as well with a standard UPnP/DLNA NAS device or you can connect a USB storage device direct to the USB-A port located below its Ethernet connection on the rear. Coaxial and

optical digital inputs are also provided, along with two sets of analogue ins, and an HDMI input complete with ARC (Audio Return Channel) compatibility, enabling TV sound to be piped through the system.

As you'd expect, the M10 can also stream from online music services (subject to subscriptions) including Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz and Tunes radio, has MQA decoding for those Tidal Masters files and is Roon-ready.

On the wireless front it really goes to town. As well as two-way Bluetooth HD with aptX support – meaning you can both play to it from a suitable device and also connect wirelessly to Bluetooth headphones and speakers – it has

Balance is maintained even when you start to push the levels up beyond sensible

Apple AirPlay 2 (including the ability to use Siri voice commands) and will also respond to spoken instructions via Amazon Alexa devices.

There's also Dirac Live room optimisation built-in, complete with a supplied microphone. On our early sample this is yet to be implemented, pending a firmware update, so it isn't possible to test its efficacy – suffice to say the Dirac version here is a stripped-down variant, with more comprehensive capability to be available at extra cost.

As well as decent terminals for a single set of speakers, the M10 also has preouts to feed an external power amplifier or active speakers, but with a twist. It's possible to use the unit in 'bridged' configuration to drive a single speaker in mono: add another

bridged amplifier and you'll have a system with very serious power.

Not that anyone buying the M10 is going to feel shortchanged in the speaker-driving department. With its HybridDigital nCore technology sourced from Hypex, the power output section claims 2x 100W whether connected to 4 or 8ohm speakers, with experience suggesting those figures are quoted somewhat conservatively, as is the NAD way.

Sound quality

That impression of 'more than adequate' power is confirmed with the M10 wired up to a range of speakers, from Quad's little S-1 standmount (HFC 404) right the way through to Bowers & Wilkins 603 floorstander (p24). Or at least it is once the system has done the necessary firmware update.

The masterful M10 sounds so much bigger than its diminutive casework would suggest, and the way it grips and drives even seemingly over-ambitious loudspeakers in my listening room is simply remarkable. This is a very powerful, and refined system in compact clothing, and quickly makes clear that its inclusion in the company's flagship Masters series is no exercise in spurious brand-stretching, but is instead reflected in its sonic ability.

It's not just with audiophile jazz material where the M10 excels, although it plays that with lovely detail underpinned with healthy bass weight – push it hard with the full-on assault of an album like Sunn O)))'s *Life Metal*, which challenges any system with the sheer density of its mix, and the M10 keeps its cool while thundering out the music as hard as you like. Even with the big Bowers & Wilkins floorstander connected it has

power to spare, while its definition and precision is in ample supply with the rhythmic demands of the Colin Currie Group's recording of Steve Reich's *Drumming*, maintaining metronomic precision as the music grows in complexity.

That same combination of detail, weight and tight control is heard to good advantage with Valery Gergiev's LSO Live recording of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, where the M10 is adept with the great sweep of the orchestra as it is with the finer detail of the scoring. It's a very mature sound, with both generous dynamic headroom and excellent resolution, and what's more the balance is maintained even when you start to push the levels up beyond sensible.

And it really gets to grips with the light and shade of Miles Davis' classic *Sketches Of Spain* album, bringing out all the character of the muted flugelhorn against backing trio and orchestra to marvellous effect: the sound is intimate, atmospheric and spellbinding, just as it should be. Oh, and much more interesting than the terminally overplayed and endlessly reworked *Kind Of Blue*.

These same qualities ensure the little NAD can rock hard, too, as it's clear from the way it crashes out the slinky rhythms of Steel Pulse's *Mass Manipulation* with a solid and agile bass, and everything up to and including the subtlest touches of percussion is open for inspection – if you're not just swept away by the infectiousness of the music, that is.

Conclusion

As its first all-in-one streaming music system, NAD's M10 really shows how it should be done. With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front-panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is one of the most desirable all-in-one solutions that we've seen and is currently the design to beat. **JP**

Despite being a fingerprint magnet, the big display makes operation an absolute delight



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Style and build; flexibility; great sound for the money
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Still a little to do on the software front at the time of writing
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	
FEATURES ★★★★★	WE SAY: A great big system in a chic, compact box, the M10 has serious user appeal

OVERALL





Meet the Titans

We spent years creating our flagship speaker range. Designing, building, listening and then tearing it all up and starting over. We only stopped once we knew that the Titan range delivered the essence of what we're all about. Music in its purest form, as the artist intended. That's the Kudos difference.



TITAN 707

Combining all of our design expertise, bespoke industry-leading components and signature pure sound, the Titan 707 delivers everything our reference Titan 808 offers, but in a beautiful hand-crafted single cabinet.

Flagship-level performance with a slightly lighter footprint. Who says you can't have it all?



K U D O S

DESIGNED AND HAND-CRAFTED
IN ENGLAND



Naim

Mu-so 2nd Generation

Despite looking remarkably similar to its predecessor (HFC 391), the 2nd Generation Mu-so incorporates a lot that's new. The claimed power output still uses Class D amplifiers to deliver 75W to each of its six drivers, but now also benefits from optimised tuning in a joint partnership with Focal. The processing power of the Digital Signal Processing (DSP) system that controls the amplifier and driver arrangement claims to be significantly improved and is instrumental to the Mu-so's sound. The system can't be bypassed, but there are placement settings available via the app to tune its output to work closer to a rear wall or when placed in a corner.

The network streaming platform is the same as the one developed for Naim's Uniti all-in-one systems and dedicated streaming products. It handles PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD up to DSD128 while gapless playback is supported throughout.

As with the original Mu-so, wired and wi-fi network connectivity are available along with native support for Tidal and Spotify Connect, plus internet radio, USB-A for external drives and optical and line input connections. AirPlay has been updated to AirPlay 2, allowing it to

work as part of a multi-room setup with similarly equipped products and Chromecast support has been enabled (for lossless streaming of services that are not natively supported). Roon compatibility has been added and physical inputs have been augmented with an HDMI ARC while Bluetooth supports the AAC codec but not aptX.

Sound quality

I liked the original Mu-so for its ability to sound bigger and more authoritative than a single-chassis speaker had any right to, but there was often a sense of the processing at work. The 2nd Generation version is free of any processing effect and Hayden Thorpe's *Impossible Object* is delivered in a convincingly three-dimensional manner. Vocals take centre stage, but the sparse supporting instruments are perfectly recreated. Thorpe's movement across the piano is readily apparent and the intimacy and confinement of the piece is convincingly recreated.

The Mu-so effortlessly delivers the pace of the 24/96 remaster of Led Zeppelin's *Achilles Last Stand* while ensuring plenty of space and width to the upper registers. The standard caveats of being less forgiving towards compressed music don't really apply here. I spend a few hours

playing tracks via Deezer's Premium level (320kbps) streaming service over AirPlay 2 and enjoy everything I listen to, but there are limits. The Mu-so won't dress up challenging recordings, and makes it clear some tracks sound better than others.

There is never any shortage of bass extension, but as the volume increases it can become slightly over powering with the DSP set to 'free space' as it loses some of the tonal balance found at lower volume levels. The 'near wall' setting does a better job of keeping the sound balanced for longer.

It's as happy connected via AirPlay 2 as it is with an upsampled feed from a networked Innuos Zenith Mk3 music server (p92) running as a Roon Core, and it's telling that even with its well-developed app, Naim sees the merit in introducing additional control.

Conclusion

The Mu-so 2nd Generation is unfailingly entertaining and delivers sonics with hi-fi values and an exceptional musicality that allows you to simply enjoy the performance. This is the best one-box speaker system right now, making it a must listen. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Mu-so 2nd Generation

PRICE
£1,300

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
One-box system

WEIGHT
11.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
628 x 122 x 264mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 6x 75W
• 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128-capable DAC
• Connectivity: Ethernet; wi-fi; AirPlay 2; Chromecast; Bluetooth
• Inputs: digital optical; 3.5mm analogue jack; HDMI ARC; USB Type-A
• Roon-ready

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 452

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Outstanding sound; specification; design and build

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Bass can dominate; inputs hard to reach; no aptX

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A superbly implemented all-in-one that combines class-leading functionality with sparkling sound

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Bluesound Vault 2i

THE VAULT 2i is a 2TB network hard drive, CD ripper and streamer. Effectively, it is a music server that really only works as part of the BluOS ecosystem of products. It can rip CDs direct to its internal storage, but its library of content cannot be seen by any other UPnP or DNLA device. It can decode its own library and output via its RCA, coaxial or optical sockets.

It is compatible with PCM formats up to 24-bit/192kHz and MQA and a considerable selection of music streaming services are embedded and supported natively. As well as AirPlay 2, there's Bluetooth with aptX HD for short-range wireless streaming from a compatible device and physical inputs in the shape of a combined 3.5mm optical digital/an analogue jack. It can also act as a Roon endpoint (not a Roon Core). Chromecast is the only real omission.

Sound quality

The Vault 2i is slick and in keeping with my experience of other Bluesound products. A 16/44.1 rip of Nils Lofgren's *Acoustic Live* is a truly outstanding recording, although the amount of treble energy can sometimes have you nudging the volume down, but the Vault 2i delivers on the sheer dynamics of *Keith Don't Go* without it tipping over into an edgy 'wall of sound'.

Give it something enormous like Underworld's mighty live recording of *Push Upstairs*, and it doesn't deliver the scale and visceral impact that is possible on some rivals but it's far from unconvincing. Some of this is down to the bass, which favours detail and speed over outright depth.

The only area of annoyance is that if you don't use the Vault 2i for an hour



or so, there's a pause as the hard drive fires up before playback begins.

The 'worth' of the Vault 2i depends on how you see your setup evolving. If you just want a standalone player able to store its own content, then there are cheaper solutions available. But if you can see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem, it offers a very well thought out way of starting in a single room that will be able to support others as your system grows. All things considered, Bluesound's Vault 2i is a slick and highly practical addition to a BluOS networked music setup. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bluesound Vault 2i
PRICE
£1,100
TELEPHONE
01732 459555
WEBSITE
bluesound.com
REVIEWED
HFC 452

OUR VERDICT



Innuos Zenith Mk3

THE DRIVE OPTIONS fitted to the Zenith are all solid state to reduce the amount of mechanical noise present in the chassis. Three feet are placed asymmetrically under the chassis to prevent vibrations from being transmitted and the power supply is a triple linear type with high-quality components used throughout including low-noise regulators and Mundorf capacitors.

The server hardware of the Zenith Mk3 is built around 8GB of RAM and an Intel Quad Core CPU. It includes twin Ethernet ports, one for it to communicate with the network and the other to act as a dedicated output to a music player. If you wish to use the USB audio out to a DAC you'll need a compatible app to do so. For Roon music management software users, the Zenith Mk3 can be configured as a Roon Core. Prices start at £3,000 for models fitted with

a 1TB storage drive, while the 2TB drive of the review sample costs £3,500 and the maximum capacity 4TB version increases the price to £4,000.

Sound quality

The superbly recorded 24/88.2 version of Dead Can Dance's *Toward The Within* has a wonderful three dimensionality to it and the Zenith Mk3 does an impressive job of capturing the feeling of the theatre the band is performing in and the space that's between and around them on the stage.

The 16/44.1 rip of Bloc Party's *Luno* has an urgency that feels heightened by the Innuos. Almost all high-spec servers reveal their biggest gains via USB, but this might be the most



pronounced I've yet to experience. Switching over to Roon heightens this feeling. Via Naim's Uniti Nova, there are some serious gains to the quality of the interface – thanks to that superb integration with streaming services – but the performance still feels largely governed by the Naim.

The Zenith Mk3 is an audiophile music server with an impressively flexible and robust spec. It comes with one of the best interfaces I've seen and is compatible with Roon front ends. Its price may seem high, but it delivers an outstanding performance that will inspire confidence with anyone starting out as well as those more experienced in building network audio systems. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Innuos Zenith MK3
PRICE
From £3,000
TELEPHONE
01793 384048
WEBSITE
innuos.com
REVIEWED
HFC 451

OUR VERDICT





Melco

N100

Adding a music library server to your network to centralise all your digital audio files is becoming increasingly popular. Melco has been one of the leaders in this category and has released the N100 to provide a new first rung on its product ladder.

The entirely new server design uses a chassis that is closely related to Melco's recently released range of accessories – enabling it to be placed alongside an E100 external 3TB USB HDD or D100 USB CD drive (£1,000 each), and still only take up the same space as a full-width N1A/2.

Internally, the N100 uses a single 2TB HDD, which is roughly equivalent to 4,000 CDs stored in a lossless format. Format support is pretty much universal, thanks to compatibility with files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512.

Around the back is a pair of Ethernet ports – the N100 connects to your router as normal, but instead of passing information back through it to your network player it uses the second Ethernet to make a dedicated connection with your player without any additional traffic to keep the signal as clean as possible.

This is partnered with three USB ports. Two are extensions – one on the front and one on the back to support a backup drive like the E100 or D100 CD drive. The third is a dedicated audio output for feeding a USB DAC, which allows the N100 to

act as a streaming front end as well as a server. The catch for the matching D100 USB CD drive is that while it's an excellent stylistic match, it's rather costly when judged against some key rivals.

Sound quality

Compared with Melco's original N1A (HFC 397), it's difficult to spot the difference in performance terms, but both allow a 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *Black Sun* to sound clean and refined. The background noise floor that the music rises from feels quieter, adding to the dynamics and sense of space, which helps the performance sound big, confident and three-dimensional.

Connected to a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428), the combination works well as a network streamer in its own right. Compared with playing files from my laptop, the Melco is quieter and seems to enable music the space it needs to breathe. With some of the big integrated amps and preamps that are being fitted with a USB input, this looks a sensible way of adding full network music streaming capability as the music library is stored on the N100.

The only disappointment is the control software. It's OK in use, but doesn't feel like it really moves the game on over third-party options.

The ripping performance with the D100 USB CD drive is impressive. The drive is quiet and smooth, and makes

high-quality file rips of several CDs in my collection, including a very old and tired copy of *Experience* by The Prodigy which until now has proven rather difficult to extract a clean rip using any other hardware. It's unquestionably one of the more expensive CD drives I've seen, but as a pairing it makes pretty short work of a stack of CDs, while SongKong's music tagging software does an excellent job of applying accurate and durable metadata to the ripped files.

Conclusion

While the N100 isn't an especially radical step forward over anything we have seen from Melco already, it does bring the well-honed virtues of the brand to a more affordable price point. If you have a streaming setup that you are fundamentally happy with, the N100 music library is a great way of bringing audiophile sound quality to your digital files. With excellent stability and the elegant industrial design, it's a welcome arrival that looks set to attract those wanting to make the most of high-quality digital music playback. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Melco N100
PRICE
£1,800
ORIGIN
Japan
TYPE
2TB music server
WEIGHT
3kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 61 x 269mm
FEATURES
• Supports up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512
• Connectivity: 2x Ethernet ports; 3x USB ports
DISTRIBUTOR
Kog Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
02477 220650
WEBSITE
melco-audio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 444

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Stability; high-quality playback; facilities; build

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★☆

DISLIKE: Control app doesn't improve on third-party alternatives

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: A usefully compact music server that offers a strong overall performance

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



ATC

SIA2-100/CD2

ATC has expanded its range of electronics with a new amplifier and CD player, and the result is deeply impressive

Probably best known for its loudspeakers, ATC has also made a small range of electronics for many years. As many of the speakers it sells are active models, it knows its way around amplifiers and has taken this expertise and constructed a range of integrated, pre and power amps that have more recently been augmented by the inclusion of digital decoding. The duo you see here are the latest arrivals in the range and are in keeping with the company's design philosophy, while also being rather different from the norm – boasting a three-quarter width casework. The CD2 CD player is ATC's first attempt at pure source equipment and is designed to match the specification of the SIA2-100 integrated amp.

At first glance, the SIA2-100 (Stereo Integrated Amplifier, 2 channels, 100W) is fairly conventional. In keeping with ATC's design philosophy, it features a separate power supply for the pre and power amplifier sections and the output stage is comprised of MOSFET devices in a common source configuration. This is all fairly traditional practise, but it should mean that the SIA2-100 can handle most loudspeakers with ease. As well as offering a pair of RCA stereo analogue inputs – alongside another on a 3.5mm jack via the front panel – it additionally supports coaxial and optical digital inputs and boasts a USB-B port that can handle files up to 32-bit/ 384kHz PCM and DSD256 (DSD128 via Mac) through its AKM DAC.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC SIA2-100/CD2

PRICE
£2,500/£1,500

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated
amplifier/CD player

WEIGHT
9.7kg (amp)
4.2kg (CD player)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
315 x 113 x 315mm
(amp)
(WxHxD)
315 x 77 x 315mm
(CD player)

FEATURES
● Claimed power
output: 2x 100W
(8ohm)
● Inputs: 2x stereo
RCAs; 1x coaxial;
1x optical; 1x USB-B
port (amp)
● Outputs: 1x stereo
RCAs; 1x stereo
XLRs; 1x coaxial; 1x
optical (CD player)

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker
Technology Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 760561

WEBSITE
atcloudspeakers.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 455

The CD2 also uses an AKM DAC, but partners it with a TEAC transport mechanism and forgoes digital inputs of its own (as they're already on the amp). You do get balanced outputs, though, presumably to allow the CD2 to work with suitably equipped ATC amplifiers and preamps. The internals of the CD2 are also fastidiously designed. There are nine power regulators in the circuit to ensure accurate delivery and every section of the signal path is as short as possible.

This is admirable, but operationally the CD2 is rather quirky. There are five hard buttons on the front for quick control, but otherwise it shares a remote with the amplifier. This is convenient, but operationally feels odd. There is no marked pause button (you press play again on either the player or remote) and pressing the large button on the remote that looks like a track skip button will in fact scan the track currently playing. It all works perfectly once you are wise to it, but takes a little getting used to. The amplifier does without direct input selection, instead there is a single button that cycles through the inputs. As there aren't many inputs it's bearable, but not as good as having dedicated source buttons.

Both units are handsome and well made. The slight curve to the side cheeks is a rare flourish that looks

elegant and the rest of the product feels extremely well assembled. I especially like the arrangement of the connections across both units. Nothing feels crowded or poorly located and it makes connecting up both components very easy.

Sound quality

I initially focus on the SIA2-100. With a background in professional audio, ATC has never been about anything other than tonal accuracy and the new amp doesn't let the side down. Familiarity by Punch Brothers from *The Phosphorescent Blues* album feels utterly and unambiguously real. The pared-back instrumentation alternates with big but brief orchestral interludes that explode into life and vanish as fast as they appeared. Lead singer Chris Thile's vocals have the weight and space they need to be the soul focus of your attention.

One consistent aspect of the performance is that the SIA2-100 doesn't seek to modify the material it plays. This does mean that if the equipment it is partnered with tends towards being soft or uninvolved, it won't do anything to correct it, but with the composed yet joyous B&W 805 D3 the effect is to let the speaker lead the character of the presentation. This is not to suggest it is completely neutral, though. Via the USB-B port, there is the slightest sense of the AKM DAC making itself felt. In comparison with the more commonly encountered ESS DACs, it feels tonally sweeter, trading a little detail for a refinement that isn't always present with the Sabre family.

None of these qualities come at the expense of sounding ballistic when called upon to do so. The pulsating digital fury of Orbital's incredible *Monster's Exist* sees the duo in its absolute element. The assurance with which it hammers through the crescendos of the track is notable and

while there are some rivals that can feel a little lighter on their feet, the composure – even at anti-social levels – impresses. There are notionally more powerful amplifier designs available at a similar price, but the ease with which you can exploit the power that the ATC makes available takes some beating.

Given that the CD2 is built around similar decoding hardware, it should not come as much of a surprise to find that the performance mirrors the amplifier's digital section. There are some intriguing caveats, however. Listening to Santigold's *Master Of My Make Believe* with the CD connected to both the RCA and coaxial input of the SIA2-100, the riotous *Go!* has a little more bass weight and force via the CD2's own decoding than when using the amplifier. It's not a night

A fabulous combo that manages to thrill and cosset in equal measure

and day difference, but it's certainly worth using an analogue connection out of the CD2 if you can.

Once again, the overall balance of the CD2 is clearly targeted towards a calm and reasoned take as to what is on the CD, but if that extends to something fun it has little trouble reproducing it. The euphoric *Waiting For The 7:18* by Bloc Party is delivered with all of its joy firmly intact. The balance between Kele Okereke's heartfelt lyrics and the stomping urgent percussion is beautifully judged and notable because this disc is not a recording for the ages. The CD2 manages to open it out and deal with some of the rougher edges without compromising the feeling you are listening to an unembellished version of the music.

As a duo it's greater than the sum of its already capable parts. The forgiving element to the CD2's presentation means it will handle a collection of rough diamonds with an even handedness and consistency that rivals can lack. It also proves a happy partner for a vinyl front end and my Michell GyroDec and Cyrus Phono Signature MM/MC phono stage (*HFC* 408) setup, maintains its character and benefits from the neutral presentation and effortless headroom of the SIA2-100 integrated amplifier.

Conclusion

Even if you aren't considering the ATCs as a pair, individually they have much to offer. When partnered together the SIA2-100 amp and SOTM's sMS-200 Neo (p87) come in at a price that keeps similarly specified all-in-ones honest, the SOTM giving the amp the streaming functionality it otherwise lacks. The CD2 silver disc player is arguably more compelling as a solo purchase. It has a genuinely lovely sound that flatters discs that need to be flattered and gives free reign to those that don't. As a pair, this is a fabulous combination that manages to thrill and cosset in equal measure. ATC doesn't introduce electronics very often, but these two are worth the wait and worthwhile seeking out. **ES**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - SIA2-100

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Powerful, even handed sound; good spread of inputs; build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Lacks a little outright excitement; quirky controls
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A capable all-round amp that offers excellent performance with a wide range of setups
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - CD2

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Wonderfully sweet and lively presentation; build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Some operational quirks
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A genuinely engaging disc spinner that will get the best from any CD collection
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Those distinctive curved cheeks add a touch of class to the duo





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Audiolab 6000CDT

Built to partner Audiolab's excellent 6000A integrated (p68), the 6000CDT is slim, unobtrusive, slinky to use and sounds very good. If you have a decent DAC, it's worth considering.

Whether you choose the silver or black finish, the 6000CDT looks crisp, modern and purposeful. The slick slot-loading CD mechanism is smooth, the display is crisp and informative and it's all so simple and intuitive to use that it's a real pleasure to operate.

It uses exactly the same transport mechanism as Audiolab's flagship 8300CD silver disc spinner, mounted inside its own electromagnetically shielded enclosure. It additionally has a read-ahead digital buffer to reduce disc-reading failures, and the master clock is controlled by a temperature-compensated crystal oscillator, which we're informed makes for very low claimed jitter figures.

The coaxial output is fed from a differential line driver for a high-quality digital datastream. Round the back, it sports an optical Toslink and digital coaxial output, plus trigger sockets, an IEC power in and a main power switch. Audiolab says its power consumption is 15W in use, and less than 0.5W in standby mode.

It loads discs smoothly, isn't noisy while doing so, and then reads the CD's table of contents speedily. This done, it offers swift track access – maybe not quite up there with a top-class nineties Sony player, for

example, but way better than many modern rivals. This feels like a quality product, and not like you're slumming it in the cheap seats in any way.

There may still be some diehards who insist that "a bit is a bit" and therefore all CD transports sound the same, but this certainly is not my experience. Jitter seems to affect the sound subtly, as does poor mechanical isolation and the quality of the power supplies and digital outputs. The 6000CDT is superb for the money and turns in a great performance – not just with its partnering 6000A integrated, but with a host of other DACs that cost multiples of the matching amp's price.

Sound quality

Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way* is not the greatest hi-fi recording I have ever heard and yet the Audiolab digs deep into the disc to serve up a great big soundstage with lots of detail inside. There is a sense of being able to hear all the various tracks in the mix play along simultaneously. It seems able to eke right down into the mix, and carry all the different strands forth without tripping over its own shadow.

Another impressive facet is its soundstaging. Change's *Lover's Holiday* has impressive scale and space. Instruments are precisely located in the mix, and there is a good deal of depth perspective too. The Audiolab seems to have a lot of control, putting out an orderly recorded acoustic with

everything in its place, separated out nicely from other strands of the mix. In absolute terms higher end transports do better, but this is still impressive.

Rhythmically and dynamically it's a good performer too. Cue up Rush's *Red Barchetta* and the 6000CDT delivers a lively and pacy sound with lots going on within the broad three-dimensional canvas. The driving bass guitar is particularly evident, alongside the drummer's pan rolls and sweeps, all keeping to perfectly metronomic timing. This transport has a crisp and detailed sound with a controlled yet insightful character. More expensive designs do better in the bass with greater grip and power, but this is no slouch here either. At the other end of the frequency range, the beautifully crisp and delicate yet detailed hi-hat and ride cymbal work are very enjoyable.

Conclusion

The 6000CDT is a bargain – a true quality item at a price that often doesn't buy you very much of anything. Everything from its look and feel to the way it plays compact discs is worthy of respect. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab 6000CDT

PRICE
£380

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD transport

WEIGHT
5.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
445 x 66 x 300mm

FEATURES
• Slot-loading
CD mechanism
• Digital outputs:
1x optical; 1x coaxial

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 447

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Great design; decent build; good sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

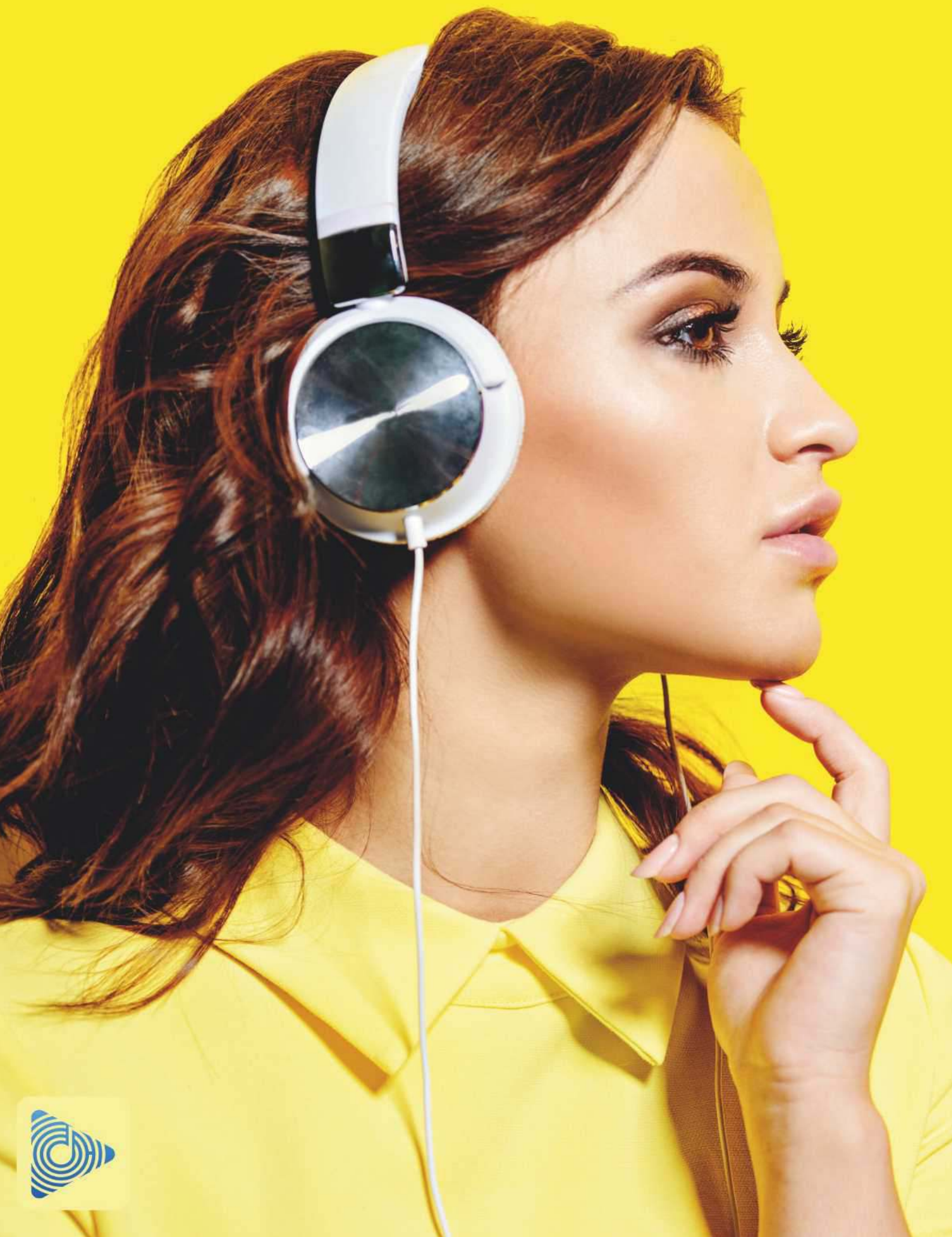
WE SAY: Superb affordable audiophile CD transport

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



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Audiolab 8300CDQ

Although just £100 more than its predecessor, the 8300CDQ is slicker and more sophisticated in terms of features, build and finish, and it supports MQA. Arguably of greater interest is DSD playback, with the 8300CDQ offering 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256 compatibility.

The 8300CDQ sports the latest 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC chips and there's a choice of digital filters, including Optimal Spectrum, Optimal Transient, Optimal Transient XD, Optimal Transient DD, Sharp Roll Off, Slow Roll Off and Minimum Phase. Four extra DSD filters are on hand to attenuate the out-of-audio band noise floor.

There's a choice of RCA or balanced XLR analogue outputs, two optical and coaxial digital inputs plus one USB-B, a optical and coaxial digital output and three pairs of analogue RCA ins.

Sound quality

There's no mistaking an Audiolab. Some people call it dry, others will say it is accurate and uncoloured. Ultimately it's a matter of taste. Steely Dan's CD remaster of *Aja* sounds lighter and crisper than it could be – there's a lot of atmosphere and detail, but instruments lack a little body and vocals a touch of warmth. Move to some retro electro like Nu Era's *Oscar Styles*, and it works better; extracting vast amounts of detail from the mix with brilliant forensic ability – its slightly analytical nature being

turned to the advantage of the music, not to its detriment.

Detail retrieval is something that impresses. Working as a DAC, it gets closer than you'd expect to Chord Electronics more costly Hugo 2 (HFC 428). It's really good at eking out subtle elements of the mix; a hi-res PCM file of *The Age Of Plastic* by The Buggles via the USB input shows an intricate portrayal of all the studio effects, and the ability to hear different strands of the music play along separately from one another is an expected pleasure for the price. Given a really good source file there's a serious amount of insight; Alex De Grassi's *The Water Garden* on DSD is spectacularly open and revealing. Admittedly it's a superb recording, but the way the 8300CDQ handles it demonstrates that it's a lot of DAC for the money.

Soundstaging is pretty special, too. The aforementioned Hugo 2 does better, but the Audiolab can certainly go wide left-to-right. Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way* via the CD transport shows how it carries 'hard pans' from one side of the soundstage to the other well. It has a seriously spacious, large-scale sound. The great thing is that all of that detail resolution then takes over and fills in the gaps, creating a panoramic listening experience. Feed it a good hi-res file like Kate Bush's *Snowflake* and suddenly the room is taken over by the breadth of the recorded acoustic.

Rhythmically it is an able performer. It has a good deal of get up and go,

that makes songs such as The Box Tops' *The Letter* great fun. It's controlled, tidy and ordered and it's only with more subtle, non beat-driven music that you remember this is a modestly priced player. Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Symphony No.2* (London Philharmonic, Bernard Haitink) doesn't quite flow as organically as some pricier rivals.

Running through the gamut of its inputs, the 8300CDQ is hard to beat as an all-round mid-price player. Especially when working as a DAC, its standout traits are clean and balanced tonality, fine detail retrieval, wide soundstaging, decent rhythmic snap and even-handed nature. Whatever digital format or codec you choose, it's quite special to listen to and the CD transport is really very good. The analogue line inputs turn in a clean and unsullied sound that's only just a little thinner and more two dimensional than a serious purpose-designed preamplifier.

Conclusion

Audiolab's 8300CDQ takes the successful recipe of the original 8200CDQ, polishes it and adds useful functionality that will stand it in good stead for many years to come. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab 8300CDQ

PRICE
£1,100

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD player/
DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
444 x 80 x 317mm

FEATURES
• Slot-loading
CD mechanism
• 32-bit/384kHz
and DSD256-
capable DAC
with MQA support
• Digital inputs:
2x optical; 2x
coaxial; 1x USB-B
• Analogue inputs:
3x RCA
• Digital outputs: 1x
optical; 1x coaxial

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 448

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Great design;
decent build;
good sound

DISLIKE: Nothing at
the price

WE SAY: Superb
affordable audiophile
CD transport

Cambridge Audio AXC35

A PERFECT VISUAL match for Cambridge Audio's AXA35 amplifier, (HFC 454) the AXC35 plays CDs as well as home-burned CD-R/CD-RW discs containing MP3 or WMA files and uses the highly regarded Wolfson Electronics WM8524 DAC in its output stage. All of the usual track selection and programming facilities are available and it is supplied with a remote control. Stereo analogue RCA outputs are fitted, as is a coaxial digital output.

Sound quality

The AXC35 serves up a clean and detailed sound with a natural flow. There is a pleasing weight and sense of impact to the performance, which can often be lacking at this price, and a most commendable sense of cohesion across the frequency range.

At the top end there's impressive clarity, with little trace of hardness.

In spatial terms, the area between the speakers is neatly ordered. The soundstage does not extend much beyond the physical limits of the cabinets laterally, but there is a good sense of depth perspective to the rear.

The tonal palette is pleasingly broad. Donald Harrison's soprano saxophone on *Shadowbrook* has just the right amount of metallic rasp to sound believable, and the backing and fretless bass are detailed and clean. The subtle cymbal effects stand out as a result of the top-end clarity. These effects are never lost and have a consistent presence.

Not only is the bass firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing,

but when things become more dance orientated it laps up a decent beat. Spinning The Divine Comedy's *I've Been To A Marvellous Party* provides a perfect indication of this as the AXC35 makes a fine job of Neil Hannon's soft murmurings during the verses, and then really hits its stride as the thumping techno beat starts to kick in during the choruses. Give this player a bangin' tune and it loves it – pushing it out with confidence and punch that's rare at the price.

In conclusion, the AXA35 remains supreme in terms of ultimate top-end clarity and poise; being better able to pick out the finer aspects of the backing instruments. **AS**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge
Audio AXC35
PRICE
£300
TELEPHONE
0203 5141521
WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.
com
REVIEWED
HFC 454

OUR VERDICT



Musical Fidelity M3scd

TO BE CLEAR from the start: this isn't a do-it-all player, instead being a more humble option with DAC functionality. It's handsome, with a subtly understated look and fine build quality that makes it feel far more expensive than it actually is.

Musical Fidelity claims "excellent technical performance" for this player, and its quoted specs are certainly good – but this is academic, as it's what it sounds like that really matters. A 24-bit/192kHz-capable, eight times oversampling dual differential DAC is fitted – the type is not specified – and this works off the built-in CD mechanism and any of the three digital inputs. The disc mechanism is claimed to have very low jitter, and works smoothly and quietly, in conjunction with a smallish turquoise display that features a rather crude-looking retro font. Although the disc tray

is rather plasticky, its operation is pretty slick all the same.

Sound quality

Tonally, the M3scd works very well with Steve Hackett's *Star Of Sirius* proving neither too bright nor too smooth. What really impresses is its combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity; it proves able to string together elements of the mix very dextrously, making for a natural and believable sound. There is better definition of the lead acoustic guitar, and its accenting is carried more convincingly. Ditto the vocal harmonies, which sound like several voices singing at the same time rather than just an unseemly melange of them all muddled together.

The player's excellent timing and tonal balance are no less important

with Inner City's *Good Life*. The recording is opaque and foggy, yet the M3scd cuts through it and delivers a foot-tapping extravaganza. Bass is strong and bouncy, treble is subtle and smooth and the lovely lilting vocal line is rich and fluidly delivered.

Soundstaging is strong; Herbie Hancock's *Speak Like A Child* is wide with good depth perspective, inviting the listener in. The overall impression is one of an unerringly couth yet highly capable machine that makes music magic. Even Felt's edgy *Primitive Painters* jangles its way along in a really rewarding way, never assaulting the listener and always leaving you wanting more. The M3scd is an unassuming yet extremely capable machine. **DP**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
M3scd
PRICE
£1,150
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 450

OUR VERDICT





Leema Acoustics Stream IV

As the fourth incarnation of Leema Acoustics' CD player, the Stream IV adds an integrated streaming engine. Combining CD and streaming in one component seems like a smart move and though it doesn't support DSD playback, the Stream IV sets its stall out to provide a higher quality playback of PCM formats up to 24-bit/192kHz.

The CD drawer is of the slim and lightweight variety, but performs accurately and faultlessly. Around the back, the Stream IV provides two sets of analogue RCA outputs and single coaxial and digital outputs should you wish to use your own DAC. A USB-A flash drive input is included as well as an Ethernet port for connecting to a home network router or directly to a media server.

Sound quality

Spinning *Late* by Ben Folds on CD, the vocals are clean, finely textured and well projected, while the tone of the piano is compelling with plenty of harmonic richness. As bass guitar and drums join the mix, the sound is warm, extended and fulsome while the drums feel sharp and alive, clearly placed in a convincing acoustic space that is natural, fluid and refined. There is something relaxed, even-handed and assured about its CD delivery with a natural sense of timing and a vivid depth to the soundscape. CD playback by lesser exponents can

have a tendency to spotlight lead performers and leave other layers more opaque, but here the recording is revealed to be highly transparent as the Stream IV does a wonderful job of throwing more light on fine textures, without ever sounding dry or grainy.

Swapping to the streamer function and replaying the same Ben Folds track from Qobuz streamed as a 16/44.1 FLAC file is insightful. Changing from CD to streaming usually reveals compromises in streaming engines, but the streamed version is a tiny bit more brightly lit, with cymbals and snare drum a little drier. It's as though the Leema can dig a little deeper with streamed content, but I prefer the more natural CD replay. There really is very little in it, though, and this is as narrow a performance gap as I've heard without spending vast sums on high-end components.

Playing Shostakovich's *Festive Overture* from the Sheffield Lab *Moscow Sessions* on CD, the opening brass fanfare is opulent and imposing with strident horns reaching high and wide into the room. The Stream IV teases out the slight vibrato of the Russian brass section, full of glorious rasping textures and complex overtones without sounding shrill or grating. Timpani drums have potent depth and punch, while triangles glisten over the lush orchestration. Again, it's the natural flow and tempo allied to a deep transparency that

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Leema Acoustics Stream IV

PRICE
£2,300

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD player/network audio player

WEIGHT
5.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 95 x 330mm

FEATURES
• 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC
• Outputs: 2x stereo RCAs; 1x optical; 1x coaxial
• USB-A port; Ethernet port

DISTRIBUTOR
MIAN Distribution

TELEPHONE
01223 782474

WEBSITE
leema-acoustics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 456

stands out, with these qualities bringing notable scale and stability to the sonic image.

The infectious funky bass riff on *Cola* by Arlo Parks – streamed as a 16/44.1 FLAC file from Qobuz – is absolutely rock solid with visceral depth that grips your solar plexus. Parks' jazzy vocals are silky, sweet and airy, showing this is highly adept at handling light and shade while marrying the luscious rhythm section with more subtle and intimate vocals.

Conclusion

CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent and the streaming performance shares all these qualities while opening up a vast new world of music discovery. Some competitors feel more robust, but the Stream IV must be viewed as two quality products in one with the associated decisions about where money is spent. Leema has allocated the budget on things I value most – performance, functionality and attention to signal purity. A great hybrid product that delivers excellent replay of your CDs alongside highly refined streaming for the best of both digital worlds. **CW**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Musical transparency and timing with both sources

DISLIKE: Basic remote control; no DSD support

WE SAY: A versatile digital source offering solid CD and streaming performance with practical functionality



Métronome Technologie

Le Player 2S

Despite its 'S' status, this latest model looks almost identical to its predecessor, and both sport the same chic, silvery grey casework, Delrin feet and solid aluminium front plate hosting a slim CD drawer, understated blue LED display and sleek metal buttons. Around the back unbalanced RCA, balanced XLR and USB inputs and an S/PDIF output look similar to before, but don't tell the full story.

The main difference between the Le Player 2 and the 2S is the USB input supports PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD up to DSD256. This increase in resolution processing is enabled by a change in DAC architecture.

Sound quality

On *Preach* by Maverick Sabre the vocals are visceral, full of depth and bristling with detail. Every emotive inflection is painted vividly and the decay of his textured voice in the deep reverb is spellbinding. The 2S gives a lesson in imaging, painting a picture that's deep, wide, stable and compelling, and the new incarnation is already bringing extra qualities.

Just like before, it manages to balance tiny revealing details and transients without desiccating the flow and expression of music. Yet, in the 2S I sense even more light and

shade. The track swells into a huge, orchestral soundscape and the player changes up through the gears seamlessly. Many hi-fi sources do simple, stripped-back music well, but when things start to get complex and rich, the 2S confirms you've invested wisely, teasing out separate instrumentation and many layers of intertwined melodies. The depth and expression of deeper bass is noteworthy. The deepest registers are supple and preserve a degree of bounce that is highly musical, ensuring that the lowest notes always feel entirely unified with the whole track.

Changing input to a 24-bit/96kHz download of *Solo* by Lucy Rose, the timbre of the opening piano is gloriously rich and rounded yet Rose's voice is full of fragility and emotion. This is a sweet source that also has power, portraying scale and intimacy with equal aplomb. Some really incisive high-end sources can dredge detail at the cost of starting to sound brittle or stopping music flow. Instead, the 2S pulls off the trick of conveying masses of detail without ever sounding dry or matter of fact. Sound quality is similar to the existing Le Player 2, but I sense slightly more output, dynamic range and greater nuance, enabling more sensitive contrasts to be communicated.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Métronome Technologie
Le Player 2S

PRICE
£5,100

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
CD player/USB DAC

WEIGHT
12kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 115 x 435mm

FEATURES
● 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256-capable DAC
● Inputs: 1x USB-B port
● Outputs: 1x stereo RCA; Balanced XLRs; S/PDIF coaxial digital

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
absolutesounds.com

REVIEWED
HFC 449

The opening drum rim shots on *Bela Lugosi's Dead* by Bauhaus on CD crack and fizz with extra energy, tumbling over each other in transparent layers of delay and boundless reverb. A bass guitar strides into the track, full of deep, dark menace; the riff sounding notably threatening with masses of extension and atmospheric texture. Wailing guitars soar over the punchy backbeat, as Peter Murphy's sinister vocals appear centre stage. Through the 2S, his dark delivery is mesmeric, with every nuance of expression and emotional intent served up as a brooding and complex masterpiece. I've not heard a better rendition of this track as previously opaque sections are resolved and the layers of cascading reverb and guitar effects lock into sharp focus.

Conclusion

The Le Player 2S focuses on musical quality. Feed it weaker CDs or MP3s and be marvelled by its unflappable delivery and composure, encouraging you to just play whatever you want in such a musical, engaging and rewarding way that you find yourself turning the volume up and up. **CW**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sweet treble; rich bass; engineering and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** CD drawer is a little lightweight

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Effortlessly musical and completely engaging, now with superior DAC offering greater file support

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



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WHAT HI-FI?

AKG Y500

THIS ON-EAR DESIGN uses Bluetooth wireless tech and is packed with useful features. My favourite is Ambient Aware, which lets in more sound from your surroundings so you can still hear what's going on around you without having to stop the music. Perhaps even more impressive is the claimed 33-hour battery life, while five minutes of charging gets you around an hour of play time for when you're in a rush.

Sound quality

Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* sounds clear and strikes a nice balance between the track's crisp highs and bouncy bass. Gregory Porter's *Water Under Bridges* is impressively rich in detail, while tracks like Led Zeppelin's *Black Dog* and AC/DC's *Back In Black* sound authentic. The Y500 has a well-balanced signature which

works across a large range of genres, although some may appreciate a bit more warmth with vocals.

A great track to test layered high and low frequencies is Lorde's *Royals*, and the Y500 retains the clarity of the clicks at the top end while delivering deep bass at the bottom without distorting the vocals. It seems to favour higher frequencies with slightly less detail at the lower end, but is still a good all-rounder.

Employing the AAC codec over Bluetooth v4.2 wireless proves solid without any hiccups or undue background noise during testing. The audio quality steps up even further in wired mode, opening up a richer, more refined sound but Bluetooth still sounds great if you appreciate the convenience of ditching the wires.



For an on-ear design, it does a good job of isolating ambient sound, which is handy because there's no noise-cancelling technology.

AKG's Y500 wireless headphone delivers a balanced and detailed sound that combined with well-designed ergonomics, build and good comfort levels will keep you listening for hours. It comes with a useful feature set that includes fast charging, long battery life and the Ambient Aware tech is a real boon – making it a great buy at the price. **LT**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AKG Y500

PRICE
£130

WEBSITE
akg.com

REVIEWED
HFC 454

OUR VERDICT



Audio-Technica ATH-M50xBT

THE TRANSDUCER INSIDE of the M50xBT is the same as the wired version and uses a pair of 45mm dynamic drivers mounted in closed-back earcups employing rare earth magnets and copper-coated aluminium wire in the windings.

The wireless implementation is built around Bluetooth v5.0 and aptX and AAC support is included, with a seriously impressive battery life claim of 40 hours.

Sound quality

The effortless scale of The Cinematic Orchestra's *A Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* is captured very effectively and there is a commendable feeling of music happening in front of you as well as to either side. Within this space, tonal balance is accurate, Roots Manuva's vocal turn is rich and weighty and there is an elegant balance of energy and refinement

that's usefully accomplished from a headphone at this price.

The real party piece, however, is the bass response. With the crunching *We've Got To Try* by The Chemical Brothers, it manages to hit with real impact that never suffers from the sluggishness or lack of control that can sometimes be the unwanted side effect of really potent low end. If you switch to an aptX-capable source it improves further. There is more texture and detail to low-frequency sounds and that already impressive three dimensionality is even greater.

For a Bluetooth headphone costing less than £200, the ATH-M50xBT is pleasingly free of foibles. Compared with some more costly models, it can harden up a little at high levels and tiny fine details seem absent, but I am being overly picky at the price.

Audio-Technica has taken a highly regarded wired headphone design



and turned it into a very capable wireless one. Without altering its sonic character and presentation the ATH-M50xBT offers huge potential for hassle-free listening, thanks to the exceptional battery life for Bluetooth v5.0 connected devices. This is the first wireless conversion from a wired headphone design I have heard, and I am deeply impressed by the sound quality and flexibility on offer. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE
£180

TELEPHONE
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com

REVIEWED
HFC 450

OUR VERDICT



Focal Elegia

UNLIKE ITS OTHER full-size headphones, Focal's Elegia is a closed-back design. The enclosures are claimed to completely isolate the drivers from the outside world and the driver fitted into the earpieces is a 40mm dynamic type with Focal's distinctive 'M Profile'. A frequency response of 5Hz-23kHz is claimed with an impedance of 35ohm, which should make the Elegia easy to drive for lower-powered devices.

Sound quality

It only takes the opening rendition of *The Race For Space* from *Live At Brixton* by Public Service Broadcasting to demonstrate that this is a seriously accomplished headphone. Despite the closed-back design, there is a feeling of the space on stage as the audience noise is pushed towards the back of the head giving an uncanny sense of standing at the

front of the crowd. The moment when the choir reaches its crescendo results in a lovely echo return from the building and the Elegia reproduces this with far more space and tangibility than the volume of the earpiece suggests is possible.

This sense of space and airiness underpins everything that the Elegia does and even when you listen to something far smaller in scale, it still helps to make music sound more convincing. *Shadow Queen* by the Alba Griot Ensemble possesses a three dimensionality that helps to make sense of the performance as a whole. It's particularly accomplished at delivering a complete performance rather than a host of micro details. Everything on the recording is there but it doesn't distract from the music, rather it augments it and takes you beyond the equipment to let you focus on the performance itself.



This is a hugely enjoyable headphone to listen to. The work that Focal has put in means even if you don't see yourself wearing it on the move, its undemanding nature means it will deliver the bulk of its high-quality performance even when used with relatively humble source equipment. The fact that the Elegia has been achieved without hindering any of its technical abilities makes it a remarkably fine proposition indeed. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Elegia
PRICE
£800
TELEPHONE
03301 222500
WEBSITE
focal.com
REVIEWED
HFC 447

OUR VERDICT



Sennheiser Momentum 3 Wireless

BOASTING BLUETOOTH 5.0 with aptX and AAC codec support, the Momentum Wireless is built around a pair of 42mm drivers offering a claimed frequency response of 6Hz to 22kHz. It will support wired connection via a USB-C port and 3.5mm jack socket and also benefits from Sennheiser's active noise-cancelling system with three modes. There is a microphone for making and receiving calls and using your phone's voice assistant.

Sound quality

Connected via Bluetooth, music isn't affected by unwanted background noise and the sparse *Shadow Queen* by the Alba Griot Ensemble sounds immediate and believable as a result. The interplay between the guitar and harp as well as the vocal harmonies is wonderfully easy to follow. For a closed-back design,

there is very little feeling of constraint to the soundstage.

If you select something a bit more ballistic like *Can You See Me?* by Octo Octa, the Sennheiser responds effortlessly. The driving rhythm is deep and detailed without losing the energy and speed that's needed to sound completely convincing.

It blasts its way through Barns Courtney's *404* capturing the energy and intensity of the music without dwelling on the limitations of the recording. It is at times like this that the equaliser function has some tangible benefits as you can back off the upper registers fractionally for a more civilised performance. This is also useful when adjusting the tonal balance to compensate for using noise cancelling, although the amount of adjustment required is small. If you switch it on when there is little external background noise, its effect



is so subtle as to make me question whether it is working. The level of noise reduction it applies in noisier environments is impressive especially on public transport.

The Momentum Wireless keeps the excellent aesthetic of the original design and manages to combine it with a comprehensive, well-implemented and useful set of features. The result is one of the best-sounding affordable wireless headphones I've heard. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sennheiser Momentum Wireless
PRICE
£350
TELEPHONE
0333 2408185
WEBSITE
en-uk.sennheiser.com
REVIEWED
HFC 455

OUR VERDICT





Focal Stellia

At first glance, the Stellia neatly bridges the gap between the £1,400 Clear (HFC 439) and the £3,500

Utopia flagship designs, but unlike those headphones, this is a closed-back proposition and so has more in common with the Elegia opposite.

The Stellia's drivers have the same 40mm 'M profile' as the Elegia, and Focal says the claimed 35ohm impedance makes it ideal for use with portable devices.

The driver enclosure isn't entirely sealed and has two small vents that perform different roles. The first is to control the relationship between the bass and midrange, while the second dissipates the rear wave from the driver to improve linearity and low-end extension. Combined with memory foam earpieces, the Stellia is designed to achieve a perfect seal and radiates energy in the direction Focal wants. These vents do mean that it is not completely silent in use for those around you, although it's still a lot quieter than an open-back alternative.

For home use a 3m cable with a four-pin XLR termination is bundled as well as a 1.2m cable with 3.5mm jack. Focal has a knack for designing some of the most comfortable headphones, but even judged against the high standards of the rest of the range wearing the Stellia for extended periods is a joy thanks to the careful weight distribution and even exertion of force placed on either side of the head.

In a break from its other designs, the colour scheme is rather more vibrant. Focal describes it as cognac and mocha – it's not subtle, but it is certainly instantly recognisable. It's one of those finishes that works better in natural light and helps you feel as though you're getting your money's worth. Regardless of your thoughts on the styling, build quality is top notch and the materials and attention to detail combine to produce a product that looks and feels very special and comes with some great bundled accessories including a spacious carry case and smart home storage box.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Focal Stellia

PRICE
£2,800

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Closed-back,
over-ear headphone

WEIGHT
435g

FEATURES
• 40mm beryllium
dynamic driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
106dB/mW
• Detachable
cables: 1x 1.2m with
3.5mm jack; 1x 3m
with XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
SCV Distribution

TELEPHONE
03301222500

WEBSITE
focal.com

REVIEWED
HFC 452

Sound quality

I've never felt that Focal headphones struggle for detail, but this is a further step forward over previous designs. Listening to a 16/44.1 rip of The Cinematic Orchestra's *Burn Out* is extraordinary. The Stellia finds detail in the finger movement across the bass strings I've never heard before. As reviewers we're probably guilty of over using the term "forensic", but here when it comes to detail retrieval this is the only fitting adjective to use.

The top end is exceptionally well judged, giving great recordings the sparkle they deserve while avoiding coming across as aggressive or hard edged. It definitely imparts a character of its own, but it's one that I find to be wholly benign with everything I choose to play.

The most significant achievement is that even when listening for the behavioural traits that give the closed-back nature of the design away, I struggle. I'd considered the Elegia to be an almost vice-free model in this regard, but the Stellia moves things on to another level entirely. Ben Howard's *Everything* is a small-scale recording, but the complete lack of constraint is a revelatory experience.

Conclusion

Focal has a high-end headphone in the Stellia. It can be driven from a portable device but treat it with any degree of power generosity and it rewards. Like the Elegia, it's consistently fun to listen to. Some of this can be established objectively – the bass is impressively deep, but never at the expense of exceptional speed – but there is a degree of intangible joy too. Annie Lennox's *Little Bird* is delivered with technical accomplishment, but more than this there is a rhythmic engagement and basic vitality that hits places that aren't always reached. The price may seem aspirational, but this is one of the finest Focals I've heard. **ES**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Exceptionally detailed, spacious and engaging; comfort

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Needs quality partnering equipment; looks may not appeal to all

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: One of the best closed-back headphones we've ever heard

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



Oriveti OH500

FOUR KNOWLES BALANCED armatures are used in each enclosure of the OH500, with a pair employed for the midrange and a pair for treble. These are supported by an 8mm dynamic driver that handles bass response.

Each housing terminates in an MMCX connector, which means you can update the cable for one with a balanced connector or simply because the one that's supplied is a bit of a whopper comprising a four-wire braid that splits to each of the earpieces.

Sound quality

Despite there being five drivers to handle, the Oriveti requires no more power than most to hit the test level, meaning that most devices should be able to drive it without issue. The level of external noise isolation is also excellent. With the basics

sorted, the OH500 delivers a performance that consistently impresses. It combines an airiness with low-end extension that brings Philip Glass' *Koyaanisqatsi* to life in a manner that rival designs struggle to match. The weight of the organ is well conveyed and the massed voices of the choir are distinct and easy to discern.

Abi Tapia's smaller scale but rather more immediate *Another State Line* is no less enjoyable. The ability of the Oriveti to open out material works well here because it imparts a little air between Tapia and the supporting instruments to the benefit of both. It creates a consistently believable soundstage and pushes the performance right in front of you.

This combination of virtues means the way that it delivers Kraftwerk's *Elektro Kardiogramm* is impressive. The scale of the venue and size of the

crowd become a perceivable thing and form the perfect backdrop to a vivid and exciting presentation underpinned by deep and detailed bass. As a final welcome attribute, the OH500 is usefully forgiving of less than perfectly recorded material too, ensuring that White Lies' *Believe It* avoids coming off as overly harsh and aggressive. Once again, the spaciousness of the presentation is ideal as it opens out this rather dense recording, which combines nicely with a refined top end to ensure the overall performance is enjoyably vivid rather than a little harsh. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Oriveti OH500

PRICE
£500

TELEPHONE
01903 768910

WEBSITE
hifiheadphones.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 451

OUR VERDICT



Sennheiser IE 80 S BT

THE DRIVER AND enclosure section of the BT version is unchanged from the original IE 80 S and the IE 80 S BT uses the same single 10mm dynamic driver. The bass response can be adjusted via a tiny rotary control on the side to augment the already competent level of noise isolation, while a selection of ear tips is supplied.

Sennheiser's Bluetooth 5.0 implementation supports aptX HD, Low Latency and AAC codecs. Decoding is via an unspecified AKM DAC so any sample rate Bluetooth can send should be well handled.

Sound quality

Sennheiser does a fine job pushing information into a convincing arc around the head with the vast soundscape of Tool's *Fear Inoculum*. There are almost certainly multiple driver arrangements found in rival

models that have greater bass extension, but the IE 80 S BT offers beautiful integration and speed across the critical part of the audio spectrum.

Bjørn Berge's guitar in his frenetic live performance of *Trains* is easy to follow as a flurry of individual notes rather than a single blurred sound. His vocals are placed in a believable fashion to the guitar and the result is supremely convincing.

Meanwhile Emily King's *Forgiveness*, is rich and vibrant and thanks to the detail and clarity on offer, the nuances in her delivery are beautiful. Even when you play something absolutely huge in scale like Fink and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra's *Berlin Sunrise*, the Sennheiser is able to capture the individual instruments in the orchestra and render them together as a convincing and cohesive whole. There are times where I would like an extra notch or two of gain, but

it is otherwise extremely compelling and the impressive levels of isolation mean that you get the most out of the available volume on offer.

The IE 80 S BT successfully takes everything that impressed about its wired sibling and turns it into a very capable wireless design. The combination of great performance, comprehensive Bluetooth implementation and attention to comfort and build makes this an exceptionally talented in-ear. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sennheiser IE 80 S BT

PRICE
£440

TELEPHONE
0333 2408185

WEBSITE
en-uk.sennheiser.com

REVIEWED
HFC 456

OUR VERDICT



Lindemann Limetree Headphone

THE MOST NOTABLE aspect of the Limetree Headphone's design is that although exclusively analogue, it uses a MUSES 72320 digital volume control. In theory, any headphone you plug in will receive the same performance regardless of its sensitivity, and the listening level selected is further aided by adjustable impedance settings via dip switches on the underside.

As well as its headphone amp duties, it is also a fully functional preamp and has three stereo RCA inputs with matching pre-output alongside the 3.5mm headphone socket at the front. The casework feels solid and the wooden volume knob is a nice touch. Inputs are switched via a toggle on the front that doubles as the power control. Lindemann suggests a matching power amplifier will additionally be joining the fold in the future.

Sound quality

Beyond technical accomplishment, this is an enjoyable listen. It achieves a happy balance between a believable sense of accuracy and tonal realism without being a 'warts and all' style monitor. It handles *Chris* by Christine And The Queens in a way that takes full advantage of the sumptuous vocals, but ensures the experience is still fun. It has a spacious and three-dimensional sound that avoids the fatigue that extended headphone listening can sometimes generate, making it possible to listen for hours at a time without any sense of ennui creeping in.

Switching to the ballistic, rather compressed and indifferently mastered *No Tourists* by The Prodigy, the Lindemann does a fine job of ensuring the result sounds as

listenable as possible. It retains the energy and attack, but unless you wind the volume up uncomfortably high never tips over into sounding harsh or overly aggressive, meaning even sprawling music collections are unlikely to have anything in them that will be off limits.

As an entirely analogue design, this is a talented and good-value amplifier that delivers a consistently satisfying performance with a wide variety of headphones across a broad range of musical styles and material. **ES**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Lindemann
Limetree
Headphone
PRICE
£600
TELEPHONE
01334 570666
WEBSITE
eliteaudiouk.com
REVIEWED
HFC 444

OUR VERDICT



iFi Audio xCAN

A PORTABLE AND powerful analogue headphone amp, the xCAN sports both a 3.5mm headphone socket and a 2.5mm connector for balanced headphones. There are also matching 3.5mm and 2.5mm inputs around the back, allowing you to maintain a balanced signal right from your source device through to your headphones.

The only digital option is Bluetooth – with support for both aptX and AAC codecs for wireless streaming from a mobile device. The xCAN has dual-mono amps claiming 1000mW output per channel. Battery life is 18 hours with wired connections, lowering to 12 using Bluetooth.

Sound quality

Astell&Kern's AK70 MKII player (HFC 428) provides pretty good output when listening to my library of lossless AAC and FLAC files via

B&W's P9 Signature headphone (HFC 421), but the extra firepower of the xCAN certainly adds impact. It's not simply a matter of volume as it balances the sound with impressive finesse on Kate Bush's *Snowflake*. The light piano notes swirl through the air, crisp and clean, but the xCAN flexes its muscles just enough to lend the low, rumbling drums a sense of urgency.

Pro Cantione Antiqua's recording of Thomas Tallis' *Sper In Alium* is superb. With power to spare, the xCAN lifts the sound up and creates the sense of space this track requires. It keeps a sharp eye on the intertwining voices, placing them precisely and maintaining all the detail as they build to an almost overwhelming climax.

Inevitably, some of that clarity gets lost as I switch to Bluetooth streaming *Planetary (Go!)* by My Chemical Romance from my iPad. The xCAN does a good job of keeping the

clashing sounds in focus, landing the power chords like a slap to the face. But, as always, there's the slight muffling effect I associate with Bluetooth, and some distortion starts to creep in as I turn the volume dial up higher. Even so, the xCAN's power via Bluetooth is impressive, and if you like loud rock or dance music it adds a genuine feeling of extra punch.

If you simply want a headphone amp that boosts the power of your music player to your headphones in an attractive package, the xCAN is powerful, but smart enough to focus that power so it adds impact without compromising sound quality. **CJ**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio xCAN
PRICE
£300
TELEPHONE
01900 601954
WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 447

OUR VERDICT



Musical Fidelity

M6 Vinyl

THIS FLEXIBLE PHONO stage can accommodate a wide range of both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges with internal circuitry based around MF's own RIAA correction. The circuit is balanced and can be output over RCA or XLR connections. This is partnered with seven dedicated power supply circuits, each tailored to cater for specific parts of the phono stage's functionality while star grounding is employed to keep to minimise any unwanted noise.

There are three inputs selectable from the front panel where MM/MC loading settings can be configured and stored for each.

Sound quality

Starting with Nagaoka's MP-200 moving-magnet cartridge (HFC 434), the M6 Vinyl treads a fine line between accuracy and imparting

a little character of its own. Nick Drake's *Five Leaves Left* feels tonally accurate and the judgement of scale comes across as entirely correct. *Cello Song* is delivered with a combination of tonal richness and weight that draws you into the performance. The balance between Drake, his guitar and the cello is effortlessly natural and rewards all of the individual elements the attention they deserve.

Also of note is the bass response and switching to *Devil In Sports Casual* by Midfield General, the effect is startlingly good. The hefty electronic synth line can overpower everything else, but here it is perfectly judged, felt as much as heard but kept under exceptional control with everything sounding just as it should.



Where this phono stage consistently manages to excel is its emotional hook. It's very rare to simply be a spectator to what it does because it consistently draws you into what is happening in the music.

In conclusion, the M6 Vinyl is a seriously talented arrival at this price point. We can argue as to whether it's the ultimate reference tool for the money, but any doubts over specific features can't ignore the sheer joy that it delivers to vinyl replay. If you're in the market for a flexible phono stage that will do justice to your vinyl hardware and a wide selection of music, look no further; this one fits the bill perfectly. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
M6 Vinyl
PRICE
£1,400
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 451

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Rega

Aura

A NEW REFERENCE series moving-coil-only design, the Aura represents everything Rega knows about designing a phono stage. It has two gain settings of 63.5 and 69.5dB selected via a selector on the front panel, and the higher setting should ensure that even low-output cartridges or low-power amplifiers can be accommodated.

The Aura acts to invert the signal and provide an output for the balanced outputs that are available alongside the RCA connections. The nature of its circuit means that even via RCA connections, it is a 'balanced' circuit – but XLRs are available if you wish.

Sound quality

There is an immediacy to everything the Rega does, making for a hugely vivid listening experience. This is not tied to the speed of the material you

listen to. The almost processional pace of *Dionysus* by Dead Can Dance, is delivered with incredible vibrancy and a lightness of touch to tiny details to ensure they are startlingly lifelike.

Listening over a period of several days to a variety of material suggests the Aura manages to combine two generally incompatible attributes that can often trip up rivals. Firstly, it is a supremely accurate performer, delivering the furious virtuoso solo piano of Nils Frahm's *Hammers* with an impressive combination of weight, tonal realism and soundstaging. It then manages Bloc Party's *A Weekend In The City* – neither a great example of mastering nor pressing – without leaving every single flaw laid bare. At its heart, the Aura is not a 'warts and all' performer, but the way it softens



the blow on lesser sounding LPs has no effect on decent pressings. Perhaps the only area where it finds itself at any disadvantage is that noisy pressings are more apparent simply because of how quiet the phono stage sounds.

The Aura combines superlative engineering and build to create an unashamedly high-end phono stage that performs remarkably well. What sets it apart from many other very capable rivals is that it balances peerless accuracy and realism with the ability to deliver unbridled musical joy. I cannot remember reviewing a product quite as covetable as this in a very long time and as such, it's one of the finest phono stages I've ever heard. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega Aura
PRICE
£4,000
TELEPHONE
01702 333071
WEBSITE
rega.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 446

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Qobuz Studio

QOBUZ CURRENTLY BOASTS a library of over 40-million tracks with a significant quantity available at sample rates of 24/44.1 and above. It has a relatively complex pricing structure, which ranges from £10 a month for a compressed service (MP3 320kbps) through to the £300 a year Sublime+ subscription with access to hi-res streams and discounted hi-res downloads. Crucially, there is now a £25 per month Studio tier that also allows access to the hi-res content without discounts for purchases.

The desktop app has remained broadly similar for a few years now, but has been carefully refined over time. Crucially, it features a logical layout, good search functionality and clear marking of hi-res content including the resolution it is available at. Integration with the online store is excellent even if



downloading is a little clunky. This is partnered by good USB management that allows you to connect the device directly and bypass your computer settings.

Sound quality

Vivaldi's *Con Amore* is available at 24/96 and sounds absolutely superb as a result. The strings are rich and detailed with plenty of energy that never tips over into stridency or aggression. Verdi's *Le Trouvère* can be found at 24/48, which means a more realistic and believable portrayal of the venue with the performers on stage, the orchestra in front and the mass of the audience around it. The result is very atmospheric and wholly convincing.

The Comet Is Coming's *Super Zodiac* is available at 24/96 and realises the benefits of direct USB management as while there is little real tonal variation



or difference to the perceived detail compared with the same material via, say, Amazon Music HD, here it's much more rhythmically engaging and entertaining. Tool's *Fear Inoculum* sounds magnificent, with the slight drop in noise floor and subtle timing advantages that dedicated USB management allows ensuring that Qobuz is competitive with other similarly equipped services. This mainly manifests itself in the propulsive energy and timing that ensures you are pulled in to experience the performance rather than simply listening to it. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Qobuz
PRICE
£25 per month
WEBSITE
qobuz.com
REVIEWED
HFC 455

OUR VERDICT



Roon

ROON CAN BE installed on PC or Mac and used to control and send music to a USB DAC, but this barely scratches the surface of its abilities. The computer running the Roon software becomes the 'Core' and can output content to any Roon client or Roon-ready device and is able to upsample the material to higher resolution rates including DSD.

Roon is compatible with Tidal and Qobuz but rather than simply rendering them accessible via its interface, any albums added to your favourites become part of its library.

Sound quality

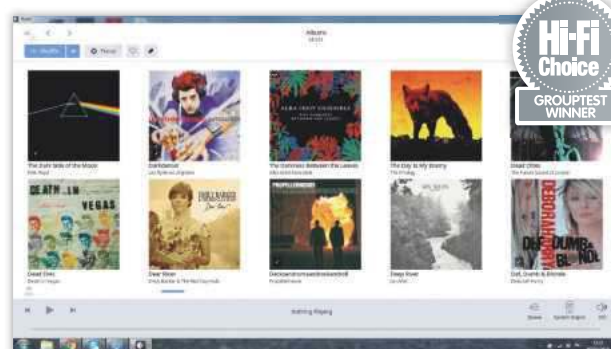
Selecting the Chord Hugo 2 profile as the output in the main zone with no upsampling or other processing applied, the differences in performance between Roon and its rivals are not huge, but cumulatively they do add up. The noise floor feels less perceptible so that The National's *Fake Empire* rises from total silence,



which adds emphasis to the piano so it comes across as weighty and natural with vocals also sounding rich and well defined. It does a commendable job of opening out Radiohead's *Burn The Witch*, finding texture in its low end that makes it sound clearer and so much better defined.

Hi-res material is also handled well. Queen's *One Vision* is energetic and all of the considerable detail is worked into the performance without spoiling the overall balance of the piece. It handles Talk Talk's *I Believe In You* with an excellent combination of natural tone and unforced spaciousness.

All the upsampling options work well and can be adjusted on the fly, while DSD works seamlessly with the Hugo 2 DAC. A 4x upsampling setting results in a performance that has consistent gains in its immediacy and presence



without affecting the commendable balance that is present.

With material from both Tidal and Qobuz streaming services added to the library, performance is absolutely consistent with that of stored material from my NAS drive. Roon has the ability to 'unpack' the MQA-encoded Tidal masters, but if you have a choice between hi-res streaming services it is Qobuz that sounds better here. Having it all available as a seamless library makes for a much more compelling user experience and Roon's suggested recommendations for further listening simply broadens its appeal. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roonlabs Roon v1.6
PRICE
\$119/year or \$499
WEBSITE
roonlabs.com
REVIEWED
HFC 448

OUR VERDICT



Atlas Cables

Eos dd

A NEW SCREENED mains power cable, the Eos dd utilises technology similar to that found in the EOS 4dd (HFC 415). The 'dd' refers to the dual drain technology, designed to act as a filter against incoming RF AC power contamination. This is achieved by dumping any airborne and electromagnetic disturbance effects rapidly to earth, thus removing them from the AC power feed to your equipment.

The Eos dd employs Atlas Cables' proprietary high-purity, low-resistance oxygen free copper (OFC) conductors. These are insulated with a stabilised PVC dielectric and, like the dual drain conductors, are surrounded with a hybrid carbon-loaded screen incorporating Atlas' anti-vibration filler. The whole construction is then sheathed in a royal blue PVC sleeve.

The cable comes terminated as standard with IEC and 13A

connectors. Nema and Shuko terminations are also available to order as options if required. The Eos dd is available in 1, 1.5, 2 and 3m lengths.

Sound quality

Considering that the conductors are fully screened, the Eos dd is reasonably flexible and I have no problems routing it around the back of my equipment for easy hookup. Connecting the Eos dd to the power supply of my valve preamp and phono stage, I spin an LP of Scarlatti sonatas played on the harpsichord by George Malcolm. I am really drawn into the performance by the excellent playing of the instrument and the overall level of realism of the recording. The silences between musical phrases are inky black, highlighting the very low noise floor



with the Eos dd cable installed. The detail and imaging of the harpsichord, meanwhile, is quite superb and there is no evidence of any mains-borne interference finding its way into the preamp or indeed the sensitive phono stage. This makes it a great upgrade from many low-cost mains leads boxed with equipment. **NR**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE
£145 for 1m cable

TELEPHONE
01563 572666

WEBSITE
atlas-cables.com

REVIEWED
HFC 452

OUR VERDICT



Audio-Technica

AT-OC9XEN

AS THE SECOND most affordable cartridge in Audio-Technica's five-strong fourth-generation OC9 range, the 'EN' refers to the use of an elliptical nude stylus mounted to an aluminium pipe-type cantilever. This is mated to an assembly utilising two coils rather than the usual one.

The body is made from aluminium and it resembles older versions of the OC9 in terms of the shape and size, but features a threaded body that simplifies fitting. Output is 0.35mV, although it should not be beyond the ability of similarly priced phono stages to handle. Its 7.6g weight shouldn't be too challenging for most tonearms and the 2g tracking force is fairly standard.

Sound quality

The AT-OC9XEN's performance feels unfailingly right. It does all the basics with little to no unwanted

noise and no issues in tracking or compliance. Musically, it manages to find a degree of order and cohesion to Miles Davis' *Prince Of Darkness* that really aids my perception of the piece as a whole. The tonality is excellent with Davis' trumpet sounding both vivid and lifelike. The snatches of percussion are pleasingly immediate and have an impressive amount of depth to them.

It grabs hold of Little Feat's *Rock & Roll Doctor* and ensures the essential swagger of the track is central to the presentation, never interfering with the accuracy of the music, but still engaging on an emotional level. That it does this while ensuring Lowell George's vocals are rich, emotive and beautifully defined is a further bonus. The tonal balance is very fractionally on the bright side of neutral, which means that with my slightly dark and dense pressing of Annie Lennox's



Legend In My Living Room it feels effortlessly vivid and lively. It imparts a little extra vitality to her vocal turn that some rivals struggle to match.

This very slight brightness means that with more aggressive material like Orbital's *Monsters Exist* there is a chance that the AT-OC9XEN might come across as a little forward and hard, particularly as the music reaches its peak. Partnered with any degree of care, this should not be an insurmountable issue and is worth working with to maintain the sheer punch and attack so central to its whole presentation that works well with the scale and three-dimensionality its impressive presentation offers. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN

PRICE
£300

TELEPHONE
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com

REVIEWED
HFC 452

OUR VERDICT



Black Rhodium Minuet



AS ONE OF Black Rhodium's new entry-level interconnects, the Minuet boasts a range of features characteristic of the more expensive interconnects in the company's range. Replacing the Prelude, the Minuet is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire for the signal conductors to improve clarity and high frequency performance.

The conductors are insulated with DM-PETM (demagnetising polyethylene), while a conductive layer is incorporated between the insulation and the screen in order to minimise microphonic noise. The Minuet is terminated with gold-plated 'hourglass silhouette' RCA plugs. The green 5.5mm diameter interconnects are available in stereo pairs or in long single runs for connecting to a subwoofer. I install the Minuet between my preamp and

monoblocks and put them through a suitable period of running-in before listening starts.

Sound quality

I start with Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5 'The Emperor'* performed by The Locrian Ensemble of London at St Martin in the Fields. The sound quality is remarkably sophisticated for a set of interconnects at this price point. The ambience of the recording venue is splendidly reproduced. Instrument imaging is excellent and in my listening room the piano occupies a clearly defined area positioned just in front of the orchestra.

For some jazz, I spin a CD of the sadly departed Jacques Loussier performing his version of JS Bach's *Siciliano in G minor* on the piano

alongside double bass and drum accompaniment. I find myself drawn right into the performance by the incredible detail of the instruments that's on show and the effortless rendition of Loussier's precise playing. The end of the piece includes some subtle hi-hats that are beautifully clear and perfectly positioned behind the piano. In conclusion the Minuet is a great-value interconnect that provides a classy performance. **NR**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Black Rhodium Minuet
PRICE
£160 for 1m cable
TELEPHONE
01332 342233
WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 453

OUR VERDICT



Chord Company Odyssey X



MADE FROM THE same materials as the Rumour X (HFC 447) but with heavier gauge conductors, the Odyssey X speaker cable is designed to bring more control, dynamics, definition and detail to a system. The original Odyssey was launched back in 1998 and designed to be very neutral sounding. It used PTFE as its dielectric material, but the Odyssey X instead opts for XLPE (cross-linked polyethylene). As with Chord's Taylon dielectric, XLPE doesn't suffer from the same phase issues as PTFE and can be produced at a lower cost.

The Odyssey X is an unscreened loudspeaker cable and comes equipped with a white PVC outer jacket and diameter of 8mm. The conductors are made from 12 AWG silver-plated oxygen-free copper and though the Odyssey is 2mm thicker

than the Rumour X, it still remains very flexible indeed.

Sound quality

Kicking off with Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No.2* performed by Vladimir Ashkenazy and the London Symphony Orchestra, I am instantly struck by the enormous soundstage. Both the side-to-side and the front-to-back imaging are superb, and all the instruments are well focused and clearly positioned. The piano is full

and rich and displays splendid levels of detail and realism.

The Syd Lawrence Orchestra with Clare Teal singing *Too Darn Hot* swings into action and livens up the listening room. From the opening saxophone that leads into the main vocal, the timing and pace sounds superb. Teal's vocal has great energy and the soundstage presentation is broad and deep as the Odyssey X conveys utterly convincing and elegant performances. **NR**



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Company Odyssey X
PRICE
£30/m plus £120 for factory-fitted banana plugs
TELEPHONE
01980 625700
WEBSITE
chord.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 451

OUR VERDICT



1ST PRIZE
WORTH
£3,252



WIN:

IsoTek Evo3 Sigmas mains conditioner

Plus, runners up prizes of a Polaris mains conditioner and Initium cables

Here's a conundrum that may well have a ring of familiarity about it to long-term *HFC* readers: you've spent years putting your beloved system together and are delighted by the perfection you've managed to achieve from your amp, turntable and speakers, but how do you go about squeezing out that extra last bit of quality without replacing the components you've fallen in love with?

Fortunately, help is at hand thanks to power specialist IsoTek, which has been focusing on maximising the potential of the mains supply delivered to our precious audio components since 2001. In the simplest of terms, the thinking is that by cleaning up the quality of the incoming electrical signal and masking it from external interference, audio

performance enjoys a significant boost. Think of it as the fuel that's required to get the car running – if you want the best performance from a hot hatch or supercar, you need to ensure you're supplying the cleanest 'fuel' possible.

Champagne super Nova

Enter, the Evo3 Sigmas – featuring the combination of IsoTek's Titan for power amplification and Nova for source equipment. It comes equipped with six mains sockets – two for high-current components such as power amplifiers and four for source equipment. Capable of handling 3,680W or 2,300W respectively, the Sigmas is perfectly equipped for dealing with high-end power requirements and

provides 108,000A of protection against surges, spikes and other electrical nastiness.

When we saw the Evo3 Sigmas in *HFC* 394, its inclusion brought about gains in bass performance with a sense of extra speed and agility. The soundstage opened up without losing any of the focus and our reviewer declared that the effect was uncannily like the strapline for Berocca vitamin tablets – my system, but on a really good day.

To get your hands on one, answer the simple question opposite and enter at: hifichoice.com. The first name pulled out of the hat will win IsoTek's £3,252 Evo3 Sigmas mains conditioner, the first runner up claims a £395 Evo3 Polaris powerblock and three further runners up take home a £90 Evo3 Initium cable. Good luck!

**2ND PRIZE
WORTH
£395**



**TO BE IN WITH A
CHANCE OF WINNING,
ANSWER THIS SIMPLE
QUESTION:**

Which two products does the
Evo3 Sigmas combine?

- A) Titan and Corsa
- B) Titan and Focus
- C) Titan and Nova

**3RD PRIZE
WORTH
£90**



The Evo3 Sigmas has two outlets dedicated
to high-current components and four
intended for low-power sources



HOW TO ENTER:

Visit our website at: www.hifichoice.com/competitions and
follow the instructions to enter

To submit your entry to the IsoTek competition, simply register using the online
form and provide your answer to the question shown above. Please ensure you
complete all required fields, including your email address, telephone number
(including area code) and postal address. We regret we cannot take postal entrants.

Arrangements for the fulfilment of prizes may be made by a third-party sponsor. AVTech Media &
My Time Media reserve the right in its sole discretion to substitute any and all prizes with prizes of
comparable value. By you entering a Competition, if you are a winner, you grant permission to use
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TERMS & CONDITIONS

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2. Entrants must be over 18 years old and resident in the United Kingdom.
3. Employees of AVTech Media or My Time Media and companies supplying competition prizes are not eligible to enter.
4. All prizes are non-transferrable and no cash or credit alternatives will be offered.
5. The editor's decision is final. The closing date is 29 January 2020.



SPENDOR

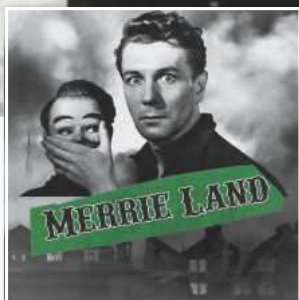
REVEALING EVERY DETAIL

Spendor D-Line loudspeakers reveal every nuance of the performance with absolute clarity and realism. With their transparent, superbly natural sound and extraordinary resolution, they create an airy, spacious soundscape, then invite you in to explore it, uncovering new depths, textures and definition in your music

MADE FOR MUSIC. DESIGNED FOR YOU.

spendoraudio.com

Musicreviews



The Good, The Bad & The Queen Merrie Land

★★★★★

CD Parlophone

NOW DAVID BOWIE has gone, Damon Albarn surely stands unrivalled as the most creative voice working in contemporary British pop. Since the glory days of Blur, he's explored electronica, hip-hop and R&B with Gorillaz; ventured boldly into world music, most notably with Africa Express and his Chinese epic *Monkey: Journey To The West*; scored *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* as a stage musical for the National Theatre; written an opera for the ENO; and released a prolific swathe of other solo and collaborative albums.

In the middle of all this creativity he also found time to put together another band, recruiting former Clash bassist Paul Simonon, veteran Afrobeat drummer Tony Allen and ex-Verve guitarist Simon Tong to form The Good, The Bad & The Queen.

The group's self-titled debut album in 2007 was a song cycle about 21st-century London and life on what Albarn affectionately called "this stropky little island of mixed-up people".

A decade and more on, we finally get the follow up and its arrival could not be more timely. Produced by

Tony Visconti – who also helmed numerous Bowie albums, including his 2016 farewell *Blackstar – Merrie Land* takes a critical but compassionate look at the state of modern Britain as we contentiously get ready to leave Europe.

In many ways it's a lament for a country that seems to have grown uglier and more narrow minded as

Musically, the record's scope is vast from off-kilter music hall beats to electronic pop storms

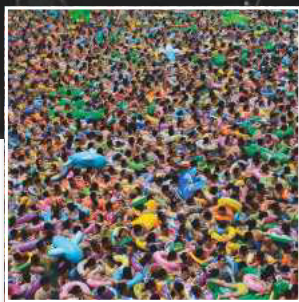
Brexit has divided Great Britain and left a deep, metaphysical scar across our national discourse and psyche. Yet the songs also brim with optimism that, bruised and battered though we may be, the traditional British virtues of decency, respect, tolerance and our "famous goodwill dumped in your fly tips" can still be salvaged from the wreckage.

While the lyrics are highly politically charged, Albarn favours whimsical, elliptical observation rather than crude sloganising, with references to lions, unicorns and maypoles as he journeys through a torn landscape from a World War One memorial to a Southend caravan park.

"Are we green? Are we pleasant? We are not either of those, we are a shaking wreck where nothing grows," he sings at his most despondent on the title track. But then, typically, in the next line he runs up a flag of hope and tells us we can still "fly to the moon".

Musically, the record's scope is vast from off-kilter music hall beats (*Gun To The Head* and *The Last Man To Leave*) to electronic pop storms (1917), via haunting balladry (*Lady Boston*), bucolic folk (*Ribbons*), sweet soul (*The Poison Tree*) and even a nostalgic echo of Britpop (*Drifters And Trawlers*).

Fifty years ago Ray Davies wrote a seminal album about our national identity for The Kinks titled *The Village Green Preservation Society*, and we should consider *Merrie Land* as the 2019 Brexit Britain update. It really is that good. **NW**



Elbow Giants Of All Sizes

★★★★★

CD Universal

IN TIMES OF doubt and despair, we've often relied on Elbow for those heart-bursting, life-affirming moments of communal uplift on blissful songs such as *One Day Like This* and *First Steps* – the anthem the group wrote for the London Olympics. Over seven fine studio albums from their 2001 debut *Asleep In The Back* through to 2008's Mercury Award-winning *The Seldom Seen Kid* to 2017's *Little Fictions*, Elbow has crafted an epic style without descending into bombast, a kind of thinking person's stadium-rock – the only band in the land capable of combining the *avant-garde* cerebralism of Radiohead with the melodic populism of Coldplay.

So let us begin with a health warning. Elbow's eighth studio album is cut from more sombre-hued cloth, a soundtrack for these "hope-free, faith-free, charity-free days", as the band puts it. This is Elbow

at their most bruised and bewildered, raging over Brexit and the Grenfell Tower tragedy and weeping over the recent death of long-term friends and family members. As Guy Garvey sings on *White Noise White Heat*, it's hardly time for "some blarney Mantovani with a lullaby when the sky's falling in".

The anger of the lyrics finds an uncompromising echo in deep bass grooves, metallic slabs of distorted guitar, dislocated rhythms and psychedelic experimentalism. It's not that the music is difficult or abstruse; simply that themes of mourning, dissatisfaction, unease and death require a darker sonic palette. "What is the point of uplifting songs in the face of this horror?" Garvey says rhetorically.

Everywhere he looked during the two years Elbow spent making *Giants Of All Sizes*, death and disaster seemed to stalk him. *Dexter & Sinister* is both personal and political, partly about a nation divided,

partly about the loss of loved ones. *The Delayed* 3:15 with its jazzy dynamic and Morricone overtones documents a suicide on the line that halted Garvey's train from London to Manchester. *Empires* is about the collapse of the old certainties into an uneasy world in which everything is transient, while song titles such as *My Trouble* and *Doldrums* tell their own tales of the sky falling in.

It's not quite all doom and destruction and there are moments of hope and redemption. On *Deronda Road* celebrates the capacity of life for renewal via the joys of parenthood and the wonder of the world as seen through the eyes of a child, while the stately closer *Weightless* reflects in 'no man is an island' style that ultimately we are all part of something bigger and universal. Yet make no mistake, this is a dark record for decidedly dark times. **NW**

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Sarathy Korwar

More Arriving

180g vinyl

Leaf Label



DRUMMER SARATHY KORWAR'S

third album sets out the challenges that are currently being faced by what he describes as the "brown working class" in Britain today and does so in

such a way as to make even the most hardened anti-immigrant think again about the way of the world. Korwar has gathered the velvet-gloved fists of the finest young Asian poets and placed them in musical settings that perfectly compliment their sad yet powerful words. The music is played on baritone sax, keyboards,

synths and a rich variety of percussion with impressively bombastic backing for the first two tracks, which are sonically powerful but rather lack the impact of quieter numbers such as *Bol* where Zia Ahmed and Aditya Prakash run through the stereotypes of British Asian life. Growing up in a place where you are assumed to be an immigrant if not a terrorist cannot be easy and lines such as "I am curry house of the year 2005, I am rogan josh, I am so damn lost" sum this up far better than any rant.

The sound is a little dense at times, but on the vinyl you get excellent vocal clarity and decent image scale in the context of a warmer presentation than the digital alternative. **JK**



Anton Bruckner

Symphony No.6

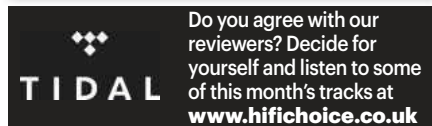
Robin Ticciati, Symphonie-Orchester Berlin

★★★★★

CD

Linn

ROBIN TICCIAI'S TAKE on Anton Bruckner's *Symphony No.6* is very much of our age. In the seventies Karajan, Haitink and Klemperer all gave us cathedrals of sound with deep strings and mellow winds formed into broad arching phrases. Today's style brings more detail into focus, with a crisper, leaner colour palette. As Ticciati showed in Brahms, he has an excellent sense of symphonic structure, so essential in Bruckner. The string sound in particular is rather bright, but clarity is excellent with a focussed and natural soundstage. A thrilling release, but many Brucknerians will still prefer the sound of the classic recordings of the seventies. **JG**



Brian Eno with Daniel Lanois & Roger Eno

Apollo: Atmospheres & Soundtracks

★★★★★

CD

UMC

VENERABLE ELECTRONIC AMBIENT pioneer and producer Brian Eno's classic 1983 album gets a welcome reissue and extension. Originally recorded as a soundtrack for a feature-length documentary, it went on to sell four million copies and was subsequently used on films like *28 Days Later* and *Traffic*. And it's easy to see why – across this blissful, sprawling record there are shimmers, slow, ecstatic movements and incredibly serene sweeping soundscapes. The 11 new tracks fit perfectly with the reissued ones, and the closing *Like I Was A Spectator* is a spectral masterpiece shot through with stars. **PH**



Steve Mason

About The Light

★★★★★

CD

Double Six

MARKING A DEPARTURE for the former Beta Band front man, *About The Light* is the first time Mason has collaborated during the writing process and worked with the band that he regularly tours with. The outcome is a far more soulful cut than usual that sounds more like a live performance with the brass stabs and female backing vocals given far more room to breathe than they might otherwise have enjoyed. Though the quirkiness of past releases may have been ditched, the resulting tracks (most notably *Stars Around My Heart* and *Walking Away From Love*) display a new-found confidence that deserves a wider audience. **JDW** ▶

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**Brahms**

Violin Concerto
Double Concerto
Tianwa Yang, Gabriel
Schwabe, Antoni Wit

★★★★★★

CD

Naxos

A THOROUGHLY ENJOYABLE release of the classic Brahms string concerto coupling, with high performance standards throughout. Violinist Tianwa Yang plays beautifully in the *Violin Concerto*, with a sweet sound, impeccable intonation and secure double stopping. The excellent cellist Gabriel Schwabe makes an ideal partner for her in the *Double Concerto*. The orchestra too are on top form, with a full and rich sound, and make satisfying *tutti* contributions. The recording is rather reverberant at times, but not overly so for Brahms, and clarity and detail are good. **JG**

**The National**
I Am Easy To Find

★★★★★★

CD

4AD

FOR THEIR EIGHTH studio album, the Cincinnati six piece looks to repeat the success of the Grammy-winning *Sleep Well Beast*. This 16-track album not only features lashings of the band's signature, melancholic pop, but also introduces Sharon Van Etten, Bowie-collaborator Gail Ann Dorsey and This Is The Kit's Kate Stables as guest vocalists. The album showcases a band at the height of its powers – confident, powerful – with plenty of soaring stadium rock, counterpointed with orchestral, multi-layered ballads. And, of course, it all drips with their trademark shimmering, wide-eyed wonder and aching melancholy. **PH**

**Sugaray Rayford**
Somebody Save Me

★★★★★★

CD

Forty Below Records

LOOKING LIKE A younger sibling of Barry White in a stetson, all 6-foot 5in and 300lbs of Rayford reeks of that rare stuff: authenticity. *Somebody Save Me* gives Sam & Dave and Otis Redding respectful nudges in the ribs, with its slow-burn soul. His voice is the star attraction, with its distinct Texan twang belting out his smokey blues over tunes sprinkled with hints of Motown and gospel augmenting the soul-blues flavour. Make way for this giant and start making room in your collection – *Somebody Save Me* is knockout stuff. **PSH**

**John Coltrane**
Blue World

★★★★★★

Vinyl

Impulse

THE TERM 'RE-RECORDING' often signals an artist creating carbon copies of hits to make a quick buck, but these tracks were intended for use as a movie soundtrack in 1964 with only a fraction ever actually used. The original tapes were given a meticulous clean up and the result sounds wonderful. The quartet's exquisite chemistry is showcased beautifully on the title track, taking its time to arrive at its joyful conclusion while *Like Sonny* is agile in its unexpected twists and loops and leaves you in no doubt that the saxophone was always destined to go to new places in Coltrane's hands. **PSH**

**Tamara Stefanovich**
Influences

★★★★★★

SACD

Pentatone

TAMARA STEFANOVICH PRESENTS an individual selection of solo piano works in an interesting if disparate program. She begins with a well-considered account of Charles Ives' complex *Piano Sonata No.1* before a characterful reading of Bartók's *Improvisations On Hungarian Peasant Songs*, Op. 20. Messiaen's *Cantéoydjayá* is also excellently played, with taught rhythmic precision and fine control of colour and dynamics. The conclusion is a stylish performance of JS Bach's *Aria Variata Alla Maniera Italiana*. Both surround and stereo mixes are satisfying, with a naturally rich tonal colour and pleasing reverberant bloom. **JG ▶**

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MUSICREVIEWS



The Beatles

Abbey Road

★★★★★

CD

Apple



IT'S 50 YEARS since The Beatles' stepped out onto the crossing outside EMI's studio and created one of the most iconic LP covers of all time. The last album they recorded together (*Let It Be* was released later, but recorded earlier) now gets the deluxe treatment with new mixes in stereo, 5.1-surround and Dolby Atmos, plus 23 previously unreleased demos and alternative takes. How much you think the listening experience is enhanced by the 'new' material will depend upon your level of

The last album they recorded together gets the deluxe treatment with new mixes galore

fanaticism. McCartney's home demo of *Goodbye* – a song he gave to Mary Hopkin – and his studio demo for *Come And Get It* – later a hit for Badfinger – are worth hearing, but the likes of take 27 of *She Came In Through The Bathroom Window* are probably for completists only. The packaging is glorious, with the four discs housed inside a splendid, LP-sized 12in, 100-page hardback book. **NW**



Aretha Franklin

Amazing Grace: The Complete Recordings

★★★★★

4x 180g vinyl

Rhino

THERE WAS AN inevitability about Aretha Franklin's sad passing being followed up by a slew of cash-in compilations and re-issues, but if they have to happen this is as good a way as any to kick things off. Released on vinyl for the first time (just two days before her birthday), *Amazing Grace* sees Franklin in her natural habitat, belting out glorious gospel as only she can. While the interventions from Reverend James Cleveland remain something of an acquired taste and the church acoustic isn't always ideal, this is a fitting way to remember a diva in her pomp. **JDW**



Leifur James

A Louder Silence

★★★★★

CD

Late Night Tales

THIS IS A down-tempo atmospheric album of the sort normally found in the electronica aisle alongside Kruder & Dorfmeister, Felix Laband and The Cinematic Orchestra, but unlike most it's not based on samples instead made by one man on real instruments. James is a multi-instrumentalist with a penchant for analogue synths, juicy bass lines and piano, with a good voice to boot. This debut is a fabulously diverse and colourful collection of mellow grooves that are not obviously compressed, but open up in the room like rich tapestries of sound. **JK**



At 41 minutes, this is like the soundtrack to an imaginary film

Jóhann Jóhannsson

12 Conversations with Thilo Heinzmann, Echo Collective

★★★★★

CD

Deutsche Grammophon

CONSISTING OF A dozen movements for string quartet, *12 Conversations* sounds both archaic and modern. Although mostly slow brooding and meditative, the work is evocatively picturesque. Not knowing the composer, you might guess Arvo Pärt due to the austere spiritual purity of the music. But Jóhannsson's score is not derivative; it just casts a hypnotic spell akin to the Estonian composer, and firmly holds one's interest. *Form* is especially clear, focussed and atmospheric. The four instruments of the quartet blend together beautifully, creating ever-changing tone colours filtered through a prism of subtle harmonic shifts. **JH**

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Donny Hathaway

Everything Is Everything

180g vinyl

Speakers Corner



Donny Hathaway. It immediately made me sit up and wonder why it had taken quite so long. After all, his name should be up there with the greats, but a tragically short career (he died aged just 33) means that he has been cruelly overshadowed by his peers. *Everything...* is his debut, released in 1970 and containing the hit *The Ghetto*, it's an

IT WAS ONE of the early demos of the Naim Statement back in the basement of KJ West One through a pair of Focal Grande Utopias that I first got to hear the incredible voice of

all-killer-no-filler release that's powered by Hathaway's incredible voice, deeply groovy keyboards, a tight rhythm section and some fabulous arrangements.

His style is gospel tinged and deeply soulful, digging deep over a band that has an effortless yet precise delivery that perfectly matches the vocal. Highlights include Ray Charles' *I Believe To My Soul*, the funky *Sugar Lee* with instruments over banter, the incredibly soulful *Thank You Master (For My Soul)* and the aforementioned *The Ghetto*, but it is as they say, all good. The sound is a little thick, the lower the notes the more blurred they get and compressed in typical analogue fashion. In other words it's a gem. **JK**

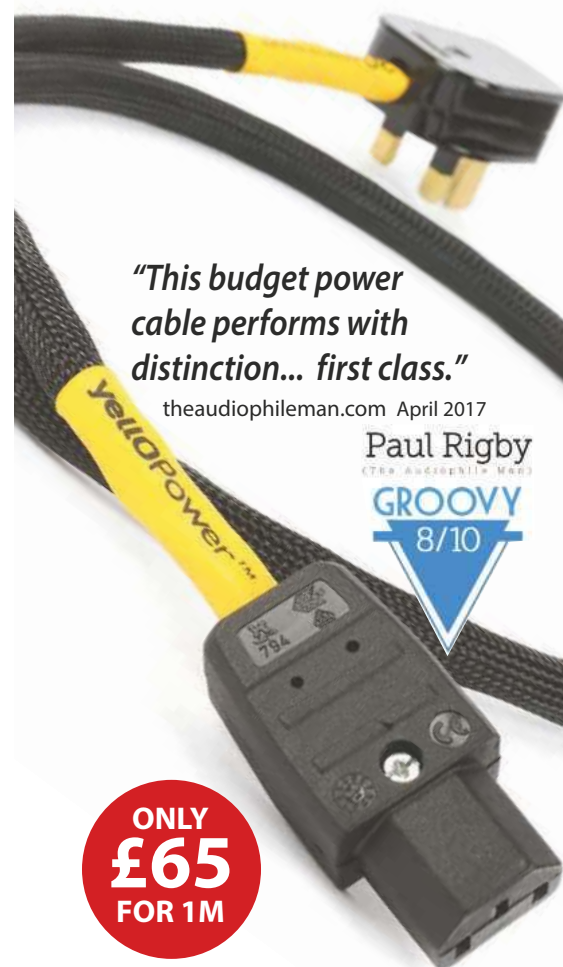
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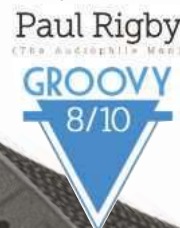
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Vaughan Williams
A Sea Symphony
BBC Symphony
Orchestra & Chorus

★★★★★

CD

Hyperion

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS' AUDACIOUSLY mighty first symphony presents a challenge for conductor, orchestra, singers and sound engineers alike. This recording succeeds in every way. With 91 voices, the chorus may be modest in size but it is of consistently excellent quality. The two soloists also impress with expressive and clear diction. Martyn Brabbins has a fine conception of the huge structure and the major climaxes are majestically realised. The thrilling recorded sound impresses with a deep, open and wide soundstage, and even the most heavily scored passages are reproduced with effortless clarity. **JG**



Everything But The Girl
Amplified Heart (25th anniversary edition)

★★★★★

180g vinyl

Buzzin' Fly

EBTG GIVE PERHAPS their finest jewel a 25th anniversary spit and polish with a half-speed remastering at Abbey Road Studios ready for its vinyl debut. The remastering is impeccable giving well-loved tunes such as *Rollercoaster* and *Missing* a fresh twinkle. But given Thorn's voice and the consistently high standard of song writing, it would still sound great played on a waterlogged AM radio. A timeless, big-hearted listening experience that deserves its new heavyweight vinyl pressing, it's a must for those that missed it first time around. **PSH**



Rolling Stones
Let It Bleed (50th Anniversary Edition)

★★★★★

2x vinyl

Abkco Records

BY THE TIME of the Stones' 10th album, the band had perfected its blend of rock and roll and blues, and this – featuring Brian Jones' final appearance and Mick Taylor's debut – was to be the perfect transition from the poppy sixties to a rawer, grittier seventies. From arguably one of the greatest album openers in the shape of *Give Me Shelter*, through to the angelic voices of the London Bach Choir on the glorious *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, this is the Stones at their very best (forgetting *Monkey Man* and *Country Honk*, of course). Essential listening. **JDW**



William Tyler
Live At Third Man Records

★★★★★

Vinyl

Third Man

WILLIAM TYLER IS a leading light in the new wave of acoustic guitar players and released this live set in 2016. He's a finger picker in the so-called American Primitive style, but there is nothing primitive about his playing which infuses his songs with earthy inspiration. This live set has an enthusiastic audience and no overdubs on the largely acoustic playing, he switches to electric for two songs – one being Michael Hedges' *Going Clear*, which is a gem. The sound is almost equal to the performance. It could be a little larger, but the playing is transcendent so it doesn't matter. **JK**



The Black Keys
Let's Rock

★★★★★

CD

Nonesuch

AFTER A FIVE-YEAR hiatus, Dan Auerbach and Patrick Carney return with a bang. This is an unashamedly loud record, which Carney describes as "a homage to the electric guitar." Tracked live in the studio, the straightforward mix of blues, Southern rock, psyched-up boogie and garage swamp never descends into mundanity, thanks to Auerbach's melodic songwriting. The kicking, snarling opener *Shine A Light* parties like its 1970, while the infectious hook of *Tell Me Lies* sounds like the best song Tom Petty never got around to writing. **NW**



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Gary Numan
The Pleasure Principle: The First Recordings (40th Anniversary edition)



Vinyl

Beggars Banquet Arkive

NUMANOIDS REJOICE: CELEBRATING *The Pleasure Principle's* 40th anniversary, the Beggars Banquet Arkive imprint has excavated *The First Recordings*. Essential listening for the Tubeway Army, there's a robust intimacy to these charming-yet-assertive demos, outtakes and Peel sessions, with Numan's powerfully fragile vocals front and centre. Electronic music fans will relish the opportunity to hear embryonic and fully formed arrangements of widescreen cold wave classics such as *Films*, *Metal* and, of course, *Cars*. Audio quality is impressive overall, elevating this collection above mere archive-curio. **SB**



Confidence
Julien Behr
Orchestre De L'Opéra De Lyon
Pierre Bleuse



CD

Alpha Classics

TENOR JULIEN BEHR sings a thoroughly enjoyable selection of rarer French opera arias that will appeal to lovers of the *bel canto* world of Bellini and Donizetti. Behr sings with a firmly projected tone and an impressively clean and powerful high register. His diction is clear and his expressive range wide. While the orchestra may not quite be world class, under Bleuse's taut direction, its accompaniment is always committed and stylish. The string sound has power, but lacks depth and the principal oboist is the pick of the wind soloists. The recorded sound, particularly in the voice, is both immediate and powerful. **JG**



The artless simplicity of Póblocka's playing is immensely satisfying

JS Bach

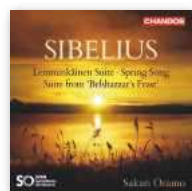
The Well-Tempered Clavier I
Ewa Póblocka



SACD

Pentatone

EWA POBŁOCKA'S NEW account of the first book of Bach's *WTC I* is among the finest I have ever heard. The technique is totally assured, and she never tries to impress the listener. She just lets the music speak for itself, and avoids unnecessary point making. The end-result is deeply musical – but never bland or faceless. Her tone is warm, yet lucid and silvery. The densest fugal passages emerge with effortless clarity, but avoid sounding severe or studied. The recording is beautifully natural and clear too – probably because Póblocka was making such a lovely sound in the studio. I just hope she records *Book II* – and soon. **JH**



Sibelius
Lemminkäinen Suite;
Spring Song Suite,
Belshazzar's Feast
Sakari Oramo
BBC SO



CD

Chandos

ORAMO DELIVERS AN exciting visceral performance of the four Sibelius *Legends*, and the BBC SO plays superbly. *Tempi* are fairly swift, imparting a welcome sense of urgency to the proceedings. Rival versions from Lief Segerstam and Mikko Franck (both Ondine) are slower, which brings out more of the music's brooding ruminative qualities. But Oramo is equally sensitive to detail, and his crisp incisive interpretation convinces totally. The two fillers are very persuasively done, and Chandos' powerful dynamic recording offers superb clarity and dynamics. Shame it's not SACD, but the sound is very impressive nonetheless. **JH**



Ikebe Shakedown
Kings Left Behind



CD

Colemine Records

THIS IS THE album Quentin Tarantino might have made if he'd picked up a guitar rather than a video camera as a kid. It's packed full of thick, funky instrumental slices and chock full of seventies licks and tricks you'll think you heard in *Jackie Brown* or *Kill Bill*. Tight horn riffs, whammy bar guitars and bongos beaten to within an inch of destruction are the strongest flavours. *Over My Head* is a perfect example of the weapons-grade grooviness on offer here. Other tracks that snap, crackle and pop on first listen include the title track and *No Going Back* that is so infectious it should be kept under lock and key in a lab. **PSH**

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Richard Black,
Hi-Fi Choice, Oct 2012



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Brexit makes its mark

The possibility of no-deal threatens the audio industry with additional costs for new safety certification on products sold in the UK. **Lee Dunkley** explores the implications

Whatever your personal position on Brexit, one thing that's worrying the UK's audio industry is the Government's recent unveiling of a new safety certification proposal that could still come into force following a no-deal exit from the European Union. Though the outcome remains unresolved, a document from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy emerged in February 2019 to prepare businesses for the possibility of leaving without a deal, stating that – subject to Parliamentary approval – certain goods to be sold in the UK could be required to comply with a new UKCA (UK Conformity Assessed) safety marking.

In the event of no-deal, goods on the UK market that have been made and assessed against EU regulatory requirements and CE marked will still be eligible for sale in Britain, although guidelines state this will “be for a time-limited period” during which it will consult with the industry and provide notice before moving to a new standard.

The CE mark introduced in 1993 belongs to the EU and is a mandatory certification stamp that indicates conformity with health, safety and environmental protection standards for products sold within the European Economic Area. The letters CE are the abbreviation of the French phrase

Conformité Européene, which it probably won't surprise you to learn means European Conformity. Most relevant to *HFC* readers, it's applied

Industry insiders are up in arms at the proposed new UK safety certification

to all audio components – but also to phones and other electrical household items including TVs, white goods and kettles *etc.*, as well as light bulbs and toys – to reassure consumers that a product meets EU legal requirements and has been safety tested so that it can be traded on the single market. If a new standard is to be created, companies will not only have to meet the requirements, but also need to update their packaging, advertising and any element where the safety mark is required to be displayed for UK sale on the products themselves.

At a time when the UK manufacturing industry is already struggling with rising costs and financial uncertainty, implementing a new standard appears to be an additional cost that will be hard to bear and has many concerned about how they will go about meeting the new regulations.

According to the BBC, it is important to note that the UKCA certification is unlikely to replace the CE marking for the purposes of products sold on the EU market. Goods made in the UK and exported to the European Union may be required



The UKCA safety standard is a complication the UK hi-fi industry can do without

to be stamped with both CE for EU markets and UKCA for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For most products, the CE marking regulations allow the testing to be done by the manufacturer itself, but for others there is a legal responsibility for it to be assessed by a third party to ensure it meets requirements, which could make certification more complicated for goods to be sold in the EU.

Costs could potentially spiral into millions of pounds for UK industries as products assessed by a UK-based notified body will additionally need to be reassessed by an EU-recognised assessment body before entering the EU market. Understandably, industry insiders are up in arms at the proposed safety certification, suggesting that the Government's decision makers are out of touch with UK manufacturing and the trading complexities it already faces. It is hoped that common sense will prevail, as the UK should surely just accept compliance marking that meets with existing CE requirements, keeping costs and disruption to an absolute minimum.

Leaving its mark

The preparations regarding the threat of a no-deal is one area that demonstrates just how closely Britain has worked with the EU on safety regulations and standards up to now. In leaving the EU without a deal in place, the UK will no longer be part of the same safeguards for these products, yet if a trade deal is struck it is hoped that the current regulations will remain in place until at least the end of 2020. Brexiteers campaigned on a platform of less red tape and significant cost savings for Britain. Instead, UK manufacturers and exporters are facing a potential challenge in product changes and spiralling red tape if EU and UK safety regulations start to go their own ways ●



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MARK LEVINSON N° 519 **£20,000**

A sophisticated digital audio player and DAC that includes support for Tidal streaming (with MQA support), Qobuz and internet radio alongside a CD mechanism and digital inputs. It can also be used as a preamp connected to a power amp.

MARK LEVINSON **N° 585.5 £16,000**

The 585.5 is relatively unusual for a Mark Levinson device in that it is an integrated amp. It still delivers a very hefty 200W per channel, which is made available to a selection of digital and analogue inputs including a high-quality phono stage.

REVEL PERFORMA **F228BE £10,000**

The largest member of the Performa Be range, the F228 is a three-way floorstander that partners composite mid and bass drivers with a beryllium tweeter in a hefty cabinet that's finished in a selection of stunning high-gloss options.



American giants

As part of Harman Luxury Audio, Mark Levinson and Revel perfectly embody US hi-fi. But their appeal is so much more universal than that...

In a famous quote by George Bernard Shaw, “The United States and Great Britain are two countries separated by a common language.” Despite being able to converse with each other, this can often serve to emphasise the differences in philosophy and approach rather than bridge them. Hi-fi is no exception. American audio equipment is built to drive rooms of a size that don’t commonly occur in the UK. As a result, it can come across as a bit – dare I say it – obvious. Using it in the UK can be akin to piloting a

This is a system that maintains American audio values, but with a wider world view

large SUV through Chipping Norton – it’s doable, but there are better suited vehicles for the job.

Taken at face value, this system doesn’t look like it is going to change these preconceived notions. It’s never going to be defined as compact, but is the result of pairing two of the most iconic American hi-fi brands. Mark Levinson and Revel have both become part of Harman Luxury Audio in recent years and there have been some interesting tweaks to how both companies make products as a result.

Looking at the Mark Levinson N° 519 digital audio player and N° 585 integrated amplifier you might assume it’s business as usual. These are immaculately constructed monuments to high-end audio. In their distinctive silver and black livery, the message they convey is one of unflappable power. The fact that the 585 is an integrated amp is proof of a certain willingness to reduce the box count. Around the back, you’ll find a swathe of digital and analogue inputs, ►



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM MARK LEVINSON/REVEL



and if you go for the 585.5 spec (seen here), it includes a phono stage too.

The N° 519 offers full network audio playback, backed up by Tidal and Qobuz. There's a selection of digital inputs, CD mechanism and full preamp functionality, as if determined to cover all digital needs in a single chassis.

The first turntable to wear a Mark Levinson badge, the N° 515 was developed with VPI, but includes features such as a captive bearing tonearm not usually seen on its offerings. Fitted with Ortofon's Cadenza Bronze cartridge and running into the phono stage of the 585.5, it allows this system to play anything.

American Be-auty

Like the Mark Levinson components, the Revel Performa F228Be has a quintessentially American aesthetic to it. Once again though, this is a very sophisticated piece of equipment. It features a beryllium tweeter and drivers that use a special Deep Ceramic Composite cone material. It's possible to argue that you have to wander a long way off the beaten track to find a speaker that costs this much that doesn't feel like a high quality item,

but even so this feels like a product that's built by people who combine enthusiasm for what they do with a healthy dollop of fastidiousness.

In fact, the whole system feels like it has been built with a level of precision that surpasses even equivalently priced rivals. Someone at Mark Levinson knows on an innate level it shouldn't matter how a volume dial feels in the hand compared with a host of more

This is a system that will play the media you own without favour or prejudice

rational specification points, but this hasn't deterred them from fitting the N° 585.5 with a control that moves like silk. There is a well-engineered app for the whole system and some decent remotes too, but this doesn't stop you from interacting with the setup more often than you need to.

The only thing that will encourage you to retreat to your seat and stop fiddling is the performance. From the opening bars of *In Every Direction* by

Above left: The N° 515, Mark Levinson's first ever turntable

Above: Immaculately finished and very user friendly, the F228Be is a star

Above right: The N° 519 handles digital audio formats with total authority

Junip, it becomes clear that this is a system that holds all the values of American audio true but also has a rather wider world view. Everything you expect it to do, it does. There is the sort of headroom that could convincingly load a barn combined with an almost nonchalant ability to deliver scale. This is a curiously ephemeral recording and yet here that reticence is peeled away leaving the band readily apparent, performing in an understated but beautiful fashion between the speakers.

Virtual reality

At the same time, while there is more presence, scale and outright reality than usual, none of the delicacy that makes this album so lovely is lost in the process. This is a phenomenal balancing act for any system to pull off and to be able to do it at the sort of listening levels this one can generate is quite extraordinary.

The simpler you go, the better this effect becomes. The 24/96 download of Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*, which feels like an uncompressed rip of the original master tape rather than anything more ambitious, is spellbinding.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM MARK LEVINSON/REVEL

The size of the Reveal suggests that this pared-back masterpiece of one man and his guitar will be given an unnatural level of weight and scale, but instead those big 8in drivers under the absolute control of the 585.5 provide a perfect sense of this quiet and self-effacing man giving you a live performance. In terms of being able to take a recording of almost any size or scale and render it as if it is you and the performance with nothing so conventional as audio equipment in the way, is something this system has down to a fine art. Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum* is dealt with almost imperiously. The pounding urgency of *Radio-Activity* is delivered with an addictive combination of smack-in-the-sternum impact and blazing speed.

House music

Switching to the 515 turntable doesn't change the balance this system possesses or blunt any of its qualities, but it does bring some new facets to the performance. This is an extremely unusual turntable. As it gets stuck into the vast title track of Orbital's *Monsters Exist*, it reveals

some of its VPI heritage. There is a complete absence of constraint to the way it creates a soundstage that could be little else, but there is a precision to its timing and outright punch that is different again. It might seem like a cynical cash-in for a brand like Mark Levinson to produce a turntable after so many years without one, but listen to the 515 alongside the 519 and the

The Revel Performa F228Be loudspeaker has a quintessentially American aesthetic

perception you get of a 'house sound' is a tangible one. It wears a Mark Levinson badge precisely because it behaves like a Mark Levinson product.

Above and beyond technical accomplishment, it makes music. The manner in which it powers through the beautiful *White Star Liner* by Public Service Broadcasting is something that grabs you on an emotional level as much as one where you note that the combination of orchestra, electric guitar and shimmering electronics are

at once distinct but beautifully homogenous. This system makes technical accomplishment so second nature that it simply furthers your enjoyment rather than existing as a point of attention in its own right.

The American dream

This then is an American hi-fi system, but one that feels like there is more than a little worldly experience to it too. It can deliver astonishing scale and impact and there will be few domestic spaces it is ever likely to struggle in, but there is rather more here than brute force – however well honed. This is a system that will play the vast majority of media you might happen to have music on without favour or prejudice. It is built to a standard that even when judged by the exacting demands of high-end audio, feels meticulous. Then, as a crowning achievement, it will find the many and varied musical messages of your collection and deliver each and every one like it was built for that album and that album alone. This is more than a fine example of American engineering nous, it is quite simply a world beater. **ES**



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Group dynamics

Being locked away for the marathon six-CD player *Group Test* in the June issue gives **David Price** a new perspective on the waning popularity of the compact disc format

Group tests are great, but whenever I do them, I end up wanting to write a dissertation-length document on all the issues they throw up. This is because the nature of the beast, so to speak, is that they're brief, concise, comparative pieces – rather than going into detail. So here's my overview on what I thought was a fascinating comparison of six of the best CD players on sale at around £1,000 from the June issue.

First, market trends. Right now we're witnessing the crossover from the old way of doing things – as embodied by the Cyrus CD i and Rega Apollo – and the new way (the Marantz ND8006). The former are simply CD players; the latter is a digital hub that plays practically any format, one of which happens to be CD. I suspect the world is moving towards the latter; we'll see ever more of these machines – although the cost of developing them will mean that smaller companies like Rega, for example, simply won't be able to afford to even if it wanted to. That's because as mainstream machines get ever more versatile, the specialist machines will get increasingly more niche – and the Apollo is very much a blueprint for this. Soon, there will be no reason to put any tweaky specialist CD player in a standard width box – because it will be seen as pandering to a market that is now on the wane.

Caught in the crossfire between niche and mass-market are the Denon DCD-1600NE, Musical Fidelity M3scd and

CD may be in the autumn of its life, but it has never been better served

YBA Heritage CD100. These all offer DAC functionality, making them more versatile than the Cyrus or Rega, but

nowhere near as flexible as the Marantz. The pressure will be on to make them more flexible as the years go by; maybe aptX HD Bluetooth next year, then UPnP streaming the year after, then a full suite of streaming services and Roon end point functionality, etc. after that...

These products could experience a sort of hi-fi 'mission creep', then. Of course, this risks cheapening the cost of the other components inside the player; fewer frills means more money for the components, power supply, mechanism and case. That's why there will always be a demand for purist designs like the Rega; the more do-it-all products appear, the more likely there will be a push-back to 'less is more' types.

Second, the quality at this price is higher than it ever has been. If there is a 'golden age' for compact disc players, it surely is now. It is fascinating that some of the group have quite old DACs inside, which are no longer flavour of the



month. Once again, it shows that it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it – the sound of a CD player is down to far more than just its digital converter chip.

The best-sounding players in the group are special. The Musical Fidelity, for example, is confident, detailed, open, rhythmically engaging and dynamically accurate. It seems to be totally unflustered by any type of music, giving an almost 'master tape-like' sound. That's an awful lot of performance for £1,150, and an interesting point along the logarithmic 'law of diminishing returns' scale. For example, it is way better than an entry-level £250 player, yet also not too far away from my favourite 'affordable' digital source, the Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC, which costs £1,800. The latter is much better, yet still the Musical Fidelity isn't completely out of sight – despite being two thirds of its price and sporting a built-in transport.

Sense of perspective

The nice thing about group tests is they're great for putting things into perspective. As models come and go, their relative merits are soon lost, so it's great to do a serious bit of comparative listening. I came away heartened about what I heard. CD may be in the late autumn of its life, yet things have never been better – or at least better value. A grand buys you a lot of performance, these days.

All of which makes me reflect on how turntables got markedly better during the nineties, the very decade they were all supposed to be dying out. The same is happening to CD now; once the cutting edge of high technology, it's almost an anachronism but people still use CD because... because they do. Just when it looks like it's the end of the road for compact disc, the format has never sounded better, or offered so much value for money ●

The impressive performance of HFC 450's six players shows just how far the format has come



DAVID PRICE
Silver surfer

Future perfect

Offering 3,000 watts of total power output, prepare to be blown away by this six-driver, DSP-controlled active loudspeaker system

There is a line of thought that truly game-changing products rarely appear from already established companies because to release such a thing is to admit that everything produced before it was somehow flawed. While I don't completely agree with the thinking, the radical speaker system design you see here is from fairly new German-based manufacturer Kii Audio.

Distributed in the UK by Sound Design Distribution, Kii Audio was founded by Bruno Putzeys – a man who has had a considerable input into the refinement of Class D amplification (see *HFC* 425) – and whose company exists solely to make active speakers. The THREE is not a traditional fusion of amplifier and transducer, being equipped with its own decoding and DSP control to form a complete system.

Putzeys set out to create a speaker with a response that is flat to within 0.5dB between 30Hz to well beyond the threshold of audibility. It can do this while removing any induced colouration from room interaction. The claim is nothing less than perfect sound almost regardless of the situation it is operating in.

To do this, the THREE is equipped with six drivers per cabinet. At the front, a 25mm waveguided tweeter ▶



COMPONENTS

Kii AUDIO THREE FROM £9,995

A six-way active speaker boasting 3,000W per pair powered by high-quality Class D amplification that uses a sophisticated DSP system to ensure it produces a single, cohesive point of sound that can be adjusted to fit the behaviour of any room it's placed in.

Kii AUDIO CONTROL £1,495

The optional controller/preamp adds digital coaxial, optical and USB inputs with support for PCM files up to 384kHz and DSD128. It provides volume, source selection and mute controls, as well as DSP boundary and contour filtering adjustments facilitated by a small OLED display.







and a 127mm midrange driver are arranged in a relatively conventional fashion and then augmented by four 165mm bass drivers – one on either side of the cabinet, and a pair on the rear that has a different role. The drivers on the side augment the bass response, while the rear ones cancel out the performance behind the speaker. The result is that all the sound they produce is perceived to emanate entirely from the midrange driver.

Power ranger

To provide the power to make this happen, each speaker has six channels of amplification claimed at 250W each. The THREE decodes PCM to 24-bit/192kHz and with the optional CONTROL (£1,495) preamp this rises to 24-bit/384kHz and adds DSD128 support. Alternatively, the THREE can be attached to a preamp of your choice if you want to break yourself in gently to the cleverness, or it can be expanded to a floorstander via a pair of BXT bass array modules (£7,500 each) adding eight drivers a side and an extra 4,000W.

The decision to use a painted outer chassis with a darker insert means that

the aesthetic has more in common with a supercar than a speaker cabinet. Quite how arresting this is, is up to you as any colour is available to order. The contrasting white of the review sample looks good, but to my mind it has even more impact with a dark grey finish.

The way the THREE sits on its dedicated stands (£995 per pair) in a room is also different to a conventional system. With all amplification built in,

The THREE has exactly the scale it needs to convince – no more, no less

the speaker becomes the sole focus and – as noted – this can be as subtle or as eye catching as the fancy takes you. For those that are perpetually ashamed at the responses of “How much?!” when explaining what they’ve spent on a system, the THREE offers the chance to own a high-end setup that will pass unnoticed by ‘civilians.’

At no stage of a varied and demanding program of listening material is there the slightest hint of

Above left:
Rear-facing drivers help shape the performance

Above:
Comprehensive inputs help the THREE work in a variety of setups

Above right:
The excellent design and build helps the Kii look good in all spaces

the technology at work. You don’t hear six drivers. You’re not aware of the software removing the ‘first boundary’ response of sound hitting the floor before making it to your ear. Instead you’re treated to a performance that quite simply shouldn’t be possible from a cabinet of this size.

How low can you go?

Take the wonderful *Goya Soda* by Christine And The Queens as an example. This suspends Héloïse Letissier’s delicate vocals over a heavyweight synth line with sparse percussion. At various points, the synth drops off into the realms of subsonics – usually going inaudible as the frequency drops. But here it remains completely perceivable as it falls to a point where it’s felt rather than heard. The effect this has on the reproduction of the vocals is none. Zero. Zip. Zilch. Letissier is smack bang between the speakers, a living breathing presence that’s utterly unaffected by the low-frequency fury at work at the same time.

Not content with a complete rewrite of the sort of punch that a standmount should be capable of, it’s the soundstage



that truly astounds. Given a live recording – such as Public Service Broadcasting's *Live At Brixton Academy* – the effect it generates is borderline incomprehensible. The lack of interaction with the room means that the main stage at Brixton is in front of you. The crowd becomes a living entity at about the point where you are and the performance – and be under no illusions, it is a performance rather than a recording – unfolds in all its glory in the room right in front of you.

Heart and soul

What is notable is that none of this order and cohesion gets in the way of musical joy. The wonderful sequence in *The Other Side* where the Apollo 8 capsule goes out of signal behind the moon is gorgeously atmospheric. The elation in both the music and the audience response at the crescendo is writ large into the recording and it's impossible not to be caught up in it all. Neither does the performance have to be big for this emotional content to hit home. The wonderfully loping and intimate, *You Can Bring Me Flowers* by Ray LaMontagne has exactly the scale it needs to convince



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– no more, no less. Nothing sounds overblown or forced and it does a fine job of finding the soul of the recording as well as the detail.

That's not to underplay just how detailed this speaker is, though. Freed from any congestion from the room and marshalling its huge decoding and amplification power, it goes about finding new information in albums

It possesses a level of performance that shouldn't be possible given its cabinet size

you thought you knew back to front. This could easily be ferociously analytical and joyless, but it isn't. Instead you are treated to the music you love augmented with every last nuance of the artist's input there for your further enjoyment.

The finishing touch to this masterclass is that the 'limits' (and I use the word for want of a better term) of the THREE are so far outside the realms of what almost any listening space in the UK will take, they might as well be

unreachable. There's nothing I can do during listening to unsettle the imperious scale and lack of compression – even when the volume level is firmly into the point where the force on display is visceral. Wind the volume back to late-evening levels and still that incredible space and three dimensionality remains. All too often speakers that are effective at one of these extremes, suffers at the other. That is clearly not the case here.

Mission possible

Should you be in any lingering doubt, this is a truly extraordinary system. The Kii Audio THREE is an incredible demonstration of the fine art of the possible. It has attributes that I haven't experienced in any other loudspeaker at any price point and as a technical accomplishment, it warrants every accolade that's thrown in its direction. This only tells half the story, however. Kii Audio has managed to achieve these technical heights without compromising on the joy that comes from a stunning looking piece of kit playing music that moves the soul. And it is this that makes it truly beautiful. **ES**



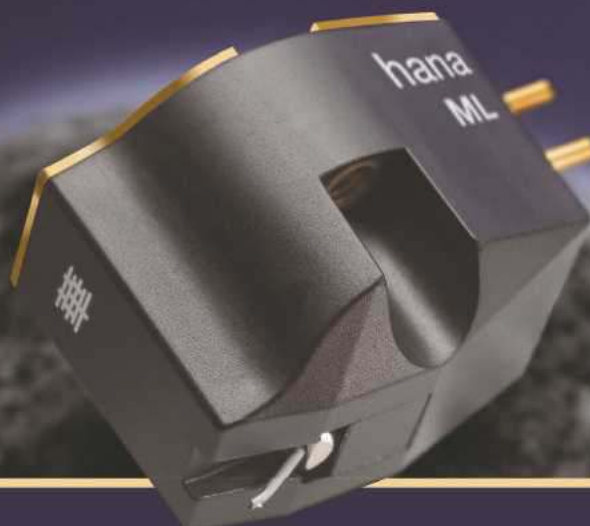
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HI>FI+ ISSUE 172 REVIEW, HANA ML/MH



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Pressing matters

As vinyl continues to grow in popularity, pressing plants are struggling to keep up with demand. **Neville Roberts** examines the challenges they face

With demand for vinyl at a 25-year high, we are seeing a new generation of pressing plants springing up. While this is great news for vinyl devotees, it also brings new challenges when it comes to maintaining the quality of the LPs themselves.

Many will remember vinyl's low point in the late seventies and early eighties when, in an effort to cut costs, pressing plants started using recycled vinyl, which resulted in an increase in background noise. LPs were so thin that they were nearly as flexible as the sleeves they were stored in. When the vinyl revival started just over 10 years ago, new record production focussed on the audiophile market and factories began producing high-quality 180g pressings on virgin vinyl, thinking that it would be a niche market. However, the demand for records has increased and shows little sign of slowing down any time soon.

With an increase in demand, new pressing plants are popping up in all kinds of curious locations such as a former Dutch prison in Leeuwarden in Northern Netherlands, which has recently seen two new presses installed by a company called Deepgrooves, while Canada's Prince Edward Island is the unlikely location of the new Kaneshii Vinyl Press. Machang Music and Pictures opened a new, two-machine, pressing plant in Seoul, South Korea and Third Man Records in the US unveiled a long-planned vinyl pressing plant in Detroit. Jamaican company Tuff Gong,

Sony is struggling to find engineers who know how to cut master lacquers

located in Kingston and founded by Bob Marley in 1965, relaunched its vinyl manufacturing services in 2017, thanks to a new partnership with US company Sunpress Vinyl and is pressing records again after years of inactivity. Last year, Sony Music restarted producing vinyl records in-house for the first time since ceasing production in 1989.

Closer to home, Dublin Vinyl opened last year in a former steelworks and presses LPs in 180g and 140g weights. In London, The Vinyl Factory Group established in 2001 now encompasses a record label, shop, magazine and vinyl pressing plant. The list goes on...

This is all fantastic news, but the rapid rise in the number of new plants has uncovered some real challenges for the industry. Pressing an LP requires highly skilled staff who understand the intricacies of getting the balance right between temperature, pressing pressure and subsequent cooling of the pressed record. For companies that are still using antiquated machinery to cater for the growing demand for vinyl, where do you go to find experienced



engineers who understand its idiosyncrasies? For example, The Vinyl Factory uses the former EMI Records vinyl pressing equipment, but where do they go to find operators who know about the 50-year-old EMI 1400 presses?

Are you experienced?

Only a few months after equipping its Tokyo studio with a cutting lathe, Sony is struggling to find experienced mastering engineers who know how to cut master lacquers. Having chatted to the mastering engineer at AIR Studios in London on a number of occasions and seen the process in action, I am aware of many of the complexities of cutting a master LP. For example, if there is too much out of phase information between the left and right channels, the cutting head will attempt to cut a very deep groove, which can make the final record impossible to press and also damage the cutting stylus. To manage this, mastering engineers sometimes have to subtly blend the left and right signals together to make the lathe cut less deep and more uniformly. Although this effectively makes the signal mono below a certain frequency, this does not pose a problem for bass signals. At the other end of the audio spectrum, excessive high frequencies can result in cooking the cutting head. Add to this the obvious need to get the groove spacing correct and deal with the swarf that is produced while the record is being cut, it is not difficult to see why it can take many years to acquire the experience needed to do a good job. Apprenticeships are once again being offered, but are there enough experienced people around today to be able to train them?

Despite these challenges, I hope that the pressing plants will continue to focus on quality. Modern developments in vinyl, coupled with new production techniques will hopefully support the increase in vinyl sales so long as the industry doesn't take its eye off the quality ball ●

Getting the equipment for pressing vinyl is one thing, but finding suitably experienced staff is much more challenging



NEVILLE ROBERTS
Cutting edge

Emotional content

Great hi-fi is partly about making you feel special and this stunning compact combination is very much a master of the art

Early on in the magnificent film *Enter The Dragon*, Bruce Lee exclaims to a young apprentice “Don’t think, feeeeee!” For the avoidance of doubt, Mr Lee was referring to the emotional state required to knock the stuffing out of your opponent with martial arts rather than anything pertaining to hi-fi, but within that gloriously over enunciated statement is something

that is entirely relevant to the concept of *Beautiful Systems*. We seek out engineering integrity, technical wizardry and stunning aesthetics, but over and above these things we celebrate their ability to feel special and, by extension, to make you feel special using them.

Often, this comes at a substantial price, and is easier to create when you have the budget. The system you see here, however, is notable

because it has this quality in spades and while it’s not what you’d call cheap, it is very keenly priced. It also goes a long way to fulfilling the more definable constructs of engineering and technical ability.

Of course, as the electronics in this system are from Primare, this should not be too surprising. The DD15 CD transport and I15 Prisma integrated amp are from the lower levels of the company’s range, but



COMPONENTS

PRIMARE I15 PRISMA £1,600

Primare's smallest integrated is a useful combo claiming a 2x 60W amplifier with network ability via wired and wireless connections, controlled by a slick UPnP app with the support of both digital and analogue inputs.

PRIMARE DD15 £1,140

As the I15 already has all the decoding required, the DD15 is a dedicated CD transport that combines a slot-loading mechanism with Primare's immaculately finished casework for a modern take on the amplifier/CD combination.

**FALCON ACOUSTICS
RAM STUDIO 10 £1,495**

The Studio 10 is the most compact member of the RAM family of speakers and combines a 150mm polypropylene mid/bass driver with a 25mm soft-dome tweeter in a rear-ported cabinet finished in a rather lovely walnut finish.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PRIMARE/FALCON ACOUSTICS



still encapsulate everything that Primare consistently does so well. This is a 21st-century take on the amp and CD player combo. The I15 does most of the heavy lifting as it contains both the amplification and decoding. The Class D amp claims 2x 60W into 8ohm and 2x 100W into 4ohm and is compact enough to ensure that the extra functionality can be comfortably accommodated in the compact chassis.

Format friendly

Five digital inputs are joined by a UPnP network section that supports AirPlay and Chromecast. Decoding is handled by an AKM AK4490 DAC, which ensures that the I15 Prisma deals with pretty much any format that you care to throw at it. In direct contrast, the DD15 is splendid in its simplicity. As the I15 has decoding on board, it is simply a CD transport and exists to perform one role.

Partnering the Scandinavian electronics is Falcon Acoustics' RAM Studio 10 standmount. Unlike the Primares, the Studio 10 is more about pedigree than radical specifications. Falcon is, after all, a custodian of the BBC LS3/5a monitor and the DNA of

the RAM Studio 10 with its soft-dome tweeter and polypropylene mid/bass driver is firmly in that vein, even if its impedance and general behaviour is more in keeping with 2019 than 1969.

Where the two companies are absolutely as one is succeeding at the magic business of influencing how you feel. Without a control knob on either component, the DD15 and I15 reflect that in reality, more than a

Viceless to live with, it has a spec that performs almost any role you can think of

single, well turned control, Primare does casework and points of customer contact at a level that makes many rivals feel homemade. Simply extracting them from their packaging generates a feeling of considerable well-being. There's no unnecessary flourishes here, but the execution is so good the product feels like a flourish in itself. The crisp white-on-black displays and lovely Prisma control app only strengthen the sentiment.

Above left: The RAM Studio 10 uses traditional materials in a way that feels modern

Above: Primare's I15 streaming amp makes all the right external connections

Above right: Exquisite Scandinavian design and metalwork is the order of the day

The RAM Studio 10, by contrast, takes traditional materials and still manages to feel contemporary. Walnut and leather in combination bring to mind British sports cars or maybe an antique bureau, but here – thanks to leaving the walnut without lacquer and encasing more of the cabinet in leather – the standmount feels bang up to date. The system as a whole is a perfectly judged balance of subtlety, elegance and functionality. It is possible to spend a great deal more and end up with something a whole lot less satisfying to spend time with.

Keeping it real

With the DD15 feeding Yazz Ahmed's *La Saboteuse* to the I15 for decoding and amplification, the Primare duo is the sonic manifestation of its wonderful externals. This is a great piece of music granted a superb recording and every nuance is delivered with an effortless feeling of realism and presence. Ahmed's trumpet has the breadth of expression of a voice and here is effortlessly reproduced.

Listen for 30 minutes or so and the really clever part of this starts to make itself felt. Balancing the desire



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PRIMARE/FALCON ACOUSTICS



for realism and immediacy with the consideration you want presentation to be something you can enjoy long term without feeling fatigued is one of the great balancing acts of hi-fi. This duo shows Primare is an absolute master at it. At every stage, across a huge variety of music, there is never a trace of softness or lack of dynamics, but equally you can spend a whole day in their company and feel it is no great undertaking to do so.

The right stuff

Of course, the Falcon plays its role in this too. This is my first meaningful interaction with the brand, but based on this I'm going to have to seek it out more often. It offers an intriguing blend of the classic British monitor speaker with something rather more invigorating. The monitor bit is easy enough to experience. Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner* is unforced and superbly immediate. The combination of his falsetto and supporting piano is simply and unfailingly right. There is never anything less than a compellingly real take on the music being played.

Where the RAM Studio 10 goes the extra mile is the endless feeling of joy



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it brings to music. It's exceptionally agile, but combines this with a level of bass weight that is impressive for a cabinet this size. It manages to convey the feeling what you are hearing is an accurate and unvarnished take on the music being played, but it also has a midrange that has you revisiting music that you love time and time again because it gets the hairs on the

The DD15 and I15 do casework and points of contact so well that rivals feel homemade

back of your neck standing up. Combine this with electronics that are as consistently joyous to listen to as the Primares, and you have a setup that constantly makes you want to try different albums on it.

And it is here that the details combine to make this system more than the sum of its parts. Things like the Falcon's impressive ability to sound just as compelling at low levels as it does with the volume cranked up or the way that the Primare Prisma

app allows you to add the services you want to the main page so your listening experience is as slick as possible, add to the overall experience. I like that there's a remote to support the app because not every single instruction you give your setup should be preceded by firing up your iPad. Individually, each is welcome, together they make you feel like you own something designed by people who think like we do.

Role play

What we have here is a system that consistently shows that character is not a polite excusing of flaws or faults. It is utterly viceless to live with and has a specification that allows it to perform almost any role you can envisage from an audio system in 2020. Thanks to the materials involved and the care and effort in their construction, the result is an almost perfect physical manifestation of equipment that generates the feeling that has me referencing kung fu movies. Every time I've sat down to listen to this system, I've ended up happier than when I started... and it doesn't get much better than that. **ES**

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Orchestral manoeuvres

Reinventing perfectly good songs with orchestral backing may have its place, but **David Vivian** is concerned that the trend shows little sign of fizzling out

There are only three versions of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* that don't make me shudder. One is half-croaked by Cohen himself. The other two are by John Cale and Jeff Buckley. Point is, the power of the song comes from it being sung as the raw, stripped-back lament it is and not the exultation suggested by its title. And it isn't just Alexandra Burke that didn't get the memo. Most recent covers treat *Hallelujah* as a kind of vocal gymkhana on which to hang showy technique and tricky embellishments. The singers may think they're adding something to the song, but for most of the time it's just superfluous, inappropriate ornamentation that simply gets in the way.

For Burke's version, it all comes together in the final window-rattling verse, any sense of restraint giving way to a decibel-drenched climax, AB's pipes fully lit and battling a suddenly materialised orchestra pedalling for all its worth. It's an impressive noise that, in pure hi-fi terms would certainly test the dynamic range of your system. But, by the end, the true meaning of the song lies in a crumpled heap on the floor.

You'd think it would serve to remind us of the old maxim: less is more. But no, the inverse seems to have taken hold via the current trend for recycling perfectly good songs with an orchestral backing tacked on in the studio. This is otherwise known as money for elaborately

They must be finding a ready market, but in all honesty they make my teeth itch

platted old rope with shiny tassels sewn on.

At the end of the seventies, Emerson, Lake & Palmer undertook part of

a tour with a 70-piece orchestra in tow, which given the prog rock supergroup's penchant for excess seemed an entirely comfortable fit. Emerson – perhaps best known for deconstructing the classics into Hammond organ-sized chunks that could be stabbed with daggers – was such a big fan of the acoustic awe a full-fat ensemble could generate, he went on to compose an entire piano concerto (*No. 1*) and followed that up with two more. Rick Wakeman's magnum opus, *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth*, is another fine example of appropriate orchestral overkill you wouldn't have any other way. Try imagining the finale played on a recorder. Orchestral *Tubular Bells*? An opportunity that was never in danger of being overlooked.

In times past, there would have been an awful lot of top-drawer instrumental person-hours between classical concert gigs going untapped. Not any more, it seems. Aretha Franklin, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, The



Carpenters, the number of old recordings with added orchestra is already large and keeps on growing. I can only assume they must be finding a ready market, but in all honesty they make my teeth itch.

It's not that I'm averse to some subtle augmentation if it's been written in from the start. When the massed strings float into the back row on Diana Krall's cover of *Desperado*, it's scalp-tingling and lovely. When a decidedly insipid sounding trumpet substitutes for a punchy and iconic horn section on Chicago's *Hard Habit To Break* from a CD compilation called *80's Symphonic*, it's both inexplicable and horrible. True, there is a degree of fascination for those with revealing hi-fi systems in determining which parts of the original mix have been stripped out and replaced, but even if you hate Chicago there's really no excuse for that.

Cut down on the sugary stuff

It isn't uniformly bad. Of all the efforts to make 'orchestral masterpieces' out of well-loved original recordings, I don't find Roy Orbison plus RPO too unpleasant, but then I must confess I never cared much for Roy Orbison in the first place. Fiddling with The Carpenters is harder to forgive. Adding sugary orchestration to already sugary arrangements was never going to end well and, despite his estimable abilities as a composer and arranger, I'm truly astonished Richard Carpenter agreed to it.

I've saved the worst for last. Producer Trevor Horn's re-imagining of his classic and quite brilliant collaboration with Yes, *Owner Of A Lonely Heart*, is almost inconceivably awful, a bloated behemoth of bombast and bad taste that should, if you still have any doubts, be upheld as a warning to future generations of the dangers awaiting anyone trawling the 'orchestra for hire' classifieds ●

Thanks, but no thanks...



DAVID VIVIAN
Sugar-free diet

That's entertainment

T+A may be known for making equipment that is exactly engineered, but that doesn't stop it from being fun to listen to

National stereotypes are pernicious things. Whatever grain of truth might exist at their core, they generally omit some of the more significant caveats. Perhaps the most unfair of any I'm aware of is that the citizens of Germany are somehow lacking in a sense of fun. Anyone who has had a night out in Berlin will be all too aware that this statement is entirely without foundation. The Germans are in fact, very keen on fun. It is simply the case that they take the business of having fun very seriously.

This rigour is no less apparent with hi-fi. What you see here is a system comprised of phenomenal engineering. It has an incredibly flexible spec and some lovely design touches, all directed solely at your enjoyment. T+A has been ploughing its own furrow since its founding in 1978. Unusually, it doesn't limit itself to a specific category of products. Across several ranges, it makes almost every type of equipment and does so almost exclusively in house.

The R Series is the longest-running range and the MP 2000 R MkII multi-source player and PA 2000 R integrated amplifier look like the archetypal classic combination, but there is more to them

COMPONENTS

T+A MP 2000 R MKII £5,546

The MP 2000 R MkII combines a CD player, digital inputs and a UPnP streaming module into a single slimline chassis. It can be used in any combination from standalone compact disc to Roon endpoint, acting to collate any other digital sources you might have.

T+A PA 2000 R £5,922

A slimline integrated amplifier that matches the MP 2000 R MkII, the PA 2000 R delivers 100W into 8ohm via resistor ladder volume available to six line inputs, one of which can be a phono stage. It also features a useful display showing the selected input and current volume level.

T+A S 2000 CTL £5,890

A three-way transmission line design with a pair of 150mm bass drivers acting on a custom transmission line with a 120mm midrange driver and 25mm tweeter operating together as a dedicated 'module' that is intended to offer very even dispersion across a wide angle.





than meets the eye. The MP 2000 R MkII can be utilised not only as a compact disc player, but also houses a streaming module with internet radio, additional digital inputs and Bluetooth all linked into the same sophisticated DAC that has a 1-Bit conversion mode for DSD. With Roon compatibility also built in, it is a deceptively ingenious piece of kit that can work with an owner as they move away from optical disc.

Input friendly

The PA 2000 R is notionally a little more straightforward, but looks can be deceiving. It offers six line inputs, three RCA and three XLR, one of which can be converted to a phono stage, and provides 100W into 8ohm for all of them. It is an elegant riposte to the idea that high-end integrated amps have to be the size of a freezer.

This system stays in house with the speakers. The S 2000 CTL is the smallest floorstander in the Criterion range, but features all of T+A's main design points. The two 150mm bass drivers vent into a carefully matched transmission line that ensures that despite being less than 1m tall, they

can extend down to 30Hz. The tweeter and midrange unit are positioned to form an 'acoustic unit' that disperses sound extremely consistently. Like the partnering electronics the result is simple enough to look at, but with considerable hidden depths.

All the elements of this system are beautifully made. The low-profile R Series components are nicely

The technical rigour that has gone into all the components is beyond reproach

constructed from thick aluminium, while the brushed and anodised front panels are festooned with controls and conventional displays. The speakers are no less fastidiously assembled and the whitewashed oak is one of a number of finishes we've featured over the years that really does make more sense in the flesh than it might do in still images.

The system makes still more sense when you turn it on. It takes about 40

Above left: The baby Criterion in whitewashed oak makes perfect sense in the flesh

Above: The slim dimensions of the main units don't hinder the level of flexibility

Above right: Every aspect of the T+A system is immaculately assembled

seconds of *Colors* by the Black Pumas to realise that this system focuses its considerable technical potential to deliver the sheer unbridled joy that is woven into the fabric of the song. This is not a terribly sophisticated piece of music and in technical terms it does nothing that wouldn't have been largely familiar to listeners in 1970. But the T+A expertly captures the loping time signature, lovely vocal turn and innate euphoria of the piece.

Total authority

The reason for its outstanding abilities is the relationship between the two components and speaker pairing. The MP 2000 R MkII is a wonderfully unforced performer that delivers an effortlessly rich and natural tonality that leaves vocals rich and their supporting instruments sounding detailed and believable. Passing the baton to the PA 2000 R, this doesn't impinge on the tonality of the source in any way. It's a remarkably self-effacing device, extremely close to the 'straight wire with gain' ideal. What it does do is grip the speakers with nigh-on total authority. Without this, transmission



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM T+A

line speakers can often fall slightly wide of their notional ideals, never quite sitting on the beat, but instead fractionally behind it.

Viscerally engaged

To listen to the T+A for any length of time is to have the technical sophistication fall away as sheer, unbridled musicality takes its place. Pick up the tempo and play Thom Yorke's electronically underpinned *Not The News*, and the T+A is an absolute delight. It's technically excellent, capturing the flurry of sounds and effects and leaving Yorke's voice sitting rich and clear at the top of it, but more than that it is viscerally engaging. This is a system that doesn't sit playing background music. It doesn't demand your attention, it consistently and justifiably earns it.

This sheer enjoyment isn't tied to speed and energy either. It makes Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner* come alive in a way that even having listened to the album numerous times since its release, still has me ambitiously attempting the seldom seen 'air piano' manoeuvre. It is more than just rhythmic energy that creates this

response. It is ensuring that every aspect of the music is delivered with almost nothing added to muddy or interfere with the process.

The 'almost' in that sentence is important, though, because the system does impart a degree of influence over what you hear – it's simply that the effect is almost impossibly benign. *Cool Car*, the

also make the most of whatever quality it happens to be in.

This then, is German fun manifest in audio. The attention to detail is exquisite and the technical rigour that has gone into all the components is absolutely beyond reproach.

Joy to the world

The reason why it has been done isn't the pursuit of technical plaudits or a desire to know what the artist had for breakfast that morning – although it's no slouch in either regard it has to be said. The real reason that T+A has gone to the design lengths it has is the pursuit of joy. Moreover, this is textbook, well-planned German joy. This is a sensibly sized, impressively flexible system that won't overpower the space it is in and, based on the level of fit and finish on display, it will do so for a very long time indeed. The moment that you turn it on and listen, though, none of that matters. This is a fabulously entertaining system that never feels its message is more important than that of the music it is playing and it is sure to delight anyone in the fortunate position of being able to own it. **ES**



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The MP 2000 R MkII sounds unforced and has effortlessly rich and natural tonality

debut album from Canadian band Girlfriend Material has an entirely deliberate bedroom studio vibe to its mastering and presentation. On many systems at this price, the crudeness of the production would be borderline unlistenable. Here, opening track *Peace Sign* is as raw and immediate as the band intends and yet the S 2000 CTL is absolutely steadfast in avoiding becoming harsh or forward. Not only will this system play music in a different digital formats, but it will

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HMV's final farewell?

With the administrators poised to strike this time last year, **James Stroud** turns sleuthhound and investigates precisely how it became so unpopular

Christmas just isn't Christmas without a whodunnit. But as well as John Malkovich murdering the Belgian accent in the BBC's Hercule Poirot romp *The ABC Murders*, in January 2019 we had another death to get our heads round. The turkey had barely gone cold when, in December 2018, HMV went into administration for the second time in six years. Its 125 UK stores were still open at the time of writing, although over 2,200 jobs were hanging by a thread.

But whodunnit? Who killed HMV (again)? The murderer will vary depending who you speak to – did the fatal wound come from casual shoppers' Brexit jitters or illegal downloads? Like a classic Agatha Christie, the reality is more complicated and the true killer obscured from view. HMV may have come perilously close to dying a death by a thousand cuts; a cumulative effect of incremental blows against the once recession-proof high-street stalwart. As no less an authority than the editor of this esteemed magazine put it in 2014 when talking about the closure of the chain's iconic Oxford Street store: "In just 30 short years, our purchasing habits have changed unrecognisably." A spokesman for HMV said that retailers had also faced "a tsunami of challenges" and that sales over Christmas last year were "extremely weak". You, like me, may have limited sympathy for an attack on Sports Direct chief executive Mike Ashley's wallet, but he had warned that November 2018 had been the "worst on record" for retailers and could well "smash them to pieces".

We hate to say it, but Ashley's soothsaying appears to have been on the money in the case of HMV. Its near

In its heyday HMV was a gateway to other glorious musical worlds

collapse is far from cause for celebration – not that you'd know, considering some of the knives-out opinion pieces which did the

rounds, agitating a flock of testy Tweets. According to *The Guardian*, HMV accounts for nearly a third of physical music sales and a quarter of all DVD sales in the UK, so its potential permanent closure was significant.

Unfortunately, the figures speak for themselves. According to the Entertainment Retailers Association (ERA), over the last 10 years, spending on digital music, video and computer games has increased from £0.66 billion to £5.3 billion. Compare this ERA stat with physical UK sales for the same categories, which has fallen from £5.7 billion to £2 billion over the same period of time. You and I may well buy as many physical formats as our budgets allow, but we are definitely in the increasing



Just 12 months ago the future didn't look too bright for the once-great record store

minority – we simply aren't representative of the majority of today's music consumers.

Perhaps the signs were already there. The HMV in Westfield Stratford, East London – an empty experience in both senses on the majority of my infrequent visits – shut up shop with a whimper rather than a bang in 2018. The contents of this particular outlet perhaps highlights the chain's malaise in its later years: best-of CDs and discounted rock biographies fought for wall space with established rock canon band T-shirts, uninspiring hi-fi equipment and largely very expensive vinyl.

So, where does yet-another opinion piece fit into the wall of column inches that's already built up around the collapsing structure of HMV? And, importantly, what does this mean for discount emporium Fopp – my own go-to for whim-purchase Blu-rays and vinyl reissues – whose parent company's livelihood perches on a knife edge? Let's throw Nipper the dog a bone and raise a glass to selective memory. Let's do our best to forget the HMV of its twilight years and remember it as a glorious rite of passage.

Those were the days my friend

There was a time not so long ago where a trip to the larger stores – with their dedicated jazz and classical sections, complete with glorious hi-fi systems, and phalanx of knowledgeable staff – was an experience rather than an endurance test. For me, HMV was the place to shop for hard-to-find reissues and obscurities only hinted at in the music weeklies... until the alternate universe of the independent record shop was discovered, that is.

I prefer to remember HMV fondly for what it once was back in its heyday. Deeply unfashionable as it has become, it was a once a gateway to other glorious musical worlds. And for this alone, we should be thankful for heeding the call of His Master's Voice ●



Appliance of science



Two British brands combine to produce an advanced music system of perfect proportions. Prepare to be blown away...

It isn't contentious to suggest that the hi-fi industry has a traditionalist streak. For many companies, the maintaining of traditional principles is vital to their perceived heritage and in extreme cases this extends to making the same physical product for years at a time. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and there are other companies with a reputation based on the desire to continue to push the technical envelope. This system is what happens when you combine two such brands.

Chord Electronics has been pursuing *avant-garde* solutions for 30 years. Nowhere has this been more apparent than with digital audio. Since the arrival of its groundbreaking DAC64, it has eschewed traditional DAC chips in favour of custom-programmed FPGA (field programmable gate array) units. While the concept has changed little in the Hugo TT2 DAC/preamp seen here, the execution is almost unrecognisable. Where the DAC64 offered support for 24-bit/96kHz music files, the TT2 offers 24-bit/768kHz. Finding music files at this sample rate is akin to hunting ►



COMPONENTS

**CHORD ELECTRONICS
HUGO M SCALER £3,500**

The Hugo M Scaler uses a Watts Time Aligned (WTA) filter that is over a million 'taps' (tapped output filter) long in order to process and upsample incoming digital signals before passing them to a matching Chord Electronics DAC via twin BNC connectors.

**CHORD ELECTRONICS
HUGO TT2 £4,000**

The successor to the original 'Table Top' version of the Hugo, the TT2 is a combined DAC and preamp with adjustable filters and the ability to act as a headphone amp as well. It also makes use of a custom-programmed FPGA with its own WTA filter.

**CHORD ELECTRONICS
TT0BY £2,900**

The TT0by is a power amplifier rated at 2x 100W that matches the style and size of the TT2 DAC while still embodying the design philosophy of Chord amplifiers, including custom-made switch mode power supplies partnered with specially made MOSFET output devices.

**BOWERS & WILKINS 805 D3
PRESTIGE EDITION £5,500**

The smallest member of the latest iteration of the 800 Series incorporates all of the features of the larger models, including a diamond tweeter housed in its own inert enclosure mated to a cone made of the company's bespoke Continuum woven material.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CHORD ELECTRONICS/B&W



for unicorns, which is where the Chord Hugo M Scaler comes in.

The M Scaler is also designed around an FPGA, but it isn't a DAC. Instead, it takes incoming digital signals and runs them through a bespoke filter and upsampling process. This takes a 44.1 or 48kHz signal (or multiples thereof) and upsamples it 16 times so that the output rate is 24-bit/705.6kHz or 24-bit/768kHz. As the Hugo TT2 is also a preamp, this means that the duo is in effect a complete and comprehensively specified front half of a system.

Dare to be different

The TToby is a compact power amp rated at 2x 100W into 4ohm. It features many of Chord's distinctive design facets including an ultra high-speed switch-mode power supply and Chord's bespoke MOSFET output devices. As a trio, these components do things with an audio signal that's radically different to almost any other audio company.

Such ingenuity requires an equally bold speaker pairing and the Bowers & Wilkins 805 D3 is precisely that. Like Chord, B&W has been taking

design concepts it has employed for decades and pushed them to ever greater technical heights. This means that in pursuit of the stiffest yet lightest tweeter possible, the 805 D3 uses a dome made of diamond. The 25mm tweeter is partnered to a 165mm mid/bass driver, which uses a woven Continuum cone made from materials that B&W keeps top secret.

These drivers are contained in a speaker that takes everything B&W

The sort of setup you settle down to listen to on Saturday morning and lose the day to

knows and ensures it is incrementally better than before. Everything from the tweeter housing through to the bass port and cabinet bracing has been looked at, dissected and improved over preceding models. To spend time with the 805 D3 is to realise that "Good enough" is a phrase that doesn't get uttered at B&W HQ.

The desire to go one better is further reflected in the aesthetic of this system

Above left: Chord packs an incredible amount of technology into a small space

Above: The 805 D3 is one of the all-time great standmounts

Above right: Gorgeous design details abound across all areas of this setup

as a whole. It looks and feels rather different to almost anything else at or near the price. It might take a little while to dial into the array of coloured LEDs that indicate all the operational functions, but once you do it's so obvious at a glance that regular displays seem rather old fashioned. The 805 D3, meanwhile, is one of the most perfectly proportioned speakers for sale, period.

Shock and awe

There's no doubting the technical and engineering innovations at work here, but spend any time listening to this system and it becomes clear that the biggest achievement is that for all its astonishing technical brilliance you can't perceive any of it during listening. The performance is so compelling as a whole that to try and pick up the impact of the diamond tweeter or FPGA processing is to waste time where you could be enjoying yourself.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with something simple. *The Trinity Session* by Cowboy Junkies is the archetypal stripped-down album. Recorded in a single evening on a DAT machine, it is all about the raw

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CHORD ELECTRONICS/B&W



quality of the performers and their surroundings. I am happy to state that never has this simplicity been more apparent than here. The Holy Trinity venue is faithfully recreated in a way that I've never experienced before and lead vocalist Margo Timmins is stitched perfectly into it.

Depth charge

It is a widely accepted convention that front-to-back depth in stereo is technically illusory, but this setup sees this notion tested to breaking point. This spaciousness is the M Scaler at work. If you remove it from the stack and run direct into the TT2, there is almost no difference to the overall tonal balance, but that effortless sense of place is reduced. It eliminates the final fleeting traces of digital from an already sublime performance and gives you something that is a window on the music – nothing more, nothing less.

The cross-brand partnership between the TToby and the 805 D3 is no less symbiotic. The TToby never shouts about its talents, but they are considerable. It's an astonishingly fast and clean-sounding amplifier – a 24/96 Qobuz stream of *The Maze* by



Chord Electronics
TELEPHONE
01622 721444

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.
co.uk

Bowers & Wilkins
TELEPHONE
0800 2321513

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

Stars is delivered with a startling combination of agility and punch, and the 805 D3 takes the idea and runs with it. The speaker is physical proof that accuracy need not come at the expense of fun. Everything it does is technically correct, but it's a riotously good listen at the same time. The epic gated drumming on The Chameleons' *Soul In Isolation* is smack-in-the-chest

The 805 D3 is one of the most perfectly proportioned speakers at any price

potent, but head-noddingly joyous at the same time. To hear Mark Burgess snarl: "I'd like to see this giant fall," and not feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand up is to have no soul.

The more you listen, the more it becomes clear that this system has an answer to everything. It takes early digital recordings and unpicks some of the over production and superficial gloss to get at the music beneath. It finds a way to provide the victims of the loudness war with the dynamic

range they were robbed of during production and still manages to make great recordings even better. I don't recall using something so well equipped to improve whatever I give it, regardless of what ails it in the first place. It does this while at no point becoming the story itself – the technology is harnessed to the task rather than unleashed on it.

Breaking with tradition

What elevates this system further is how little it asks of you while it does these incredible things. It takes up an impressively small amount of space, is attractive and unobtrusive and the range of inputs on the M Scaler should allow for a wide selection of digital sources to be accommodated. Driven by Roon or another good streaming interface, it is the sort of setup that you settle down to listen to on Saturday morning and lose the day to. There should always be a place for tradition in audio, but as a demonstration of what is possible when you keep pushing the limits, there are few better examples than this. This is the cutting-edge of hi-fi and it is truly outstanding. **ES**

The sound of muzak

Tinny versions of classics are on the rise as retailers adopt increasingly tricky ways to make us spend our cash. But, as **Nigel Williamson** reveals, there is a way to fight back

As music lovers, we are all acutely aware of the unique power of our chosen art form to manipulate our emotions and influence our behaviour. So, too, are those whose mission it is to relieve us of as much of our cash as possible – hence the near-ubiquitous use of music as a gentle persuader, soft-soaping us into a fake sense of contentment and well-being in shops, supermarkets, hotels, bars and restaurants and every other outpost of Mammon.

It used to be called ‘muzak’ and true music lovers have always derided it as anodyne aural pap that’s shamelessly used to brainwash us into submission.

How could blandness be so infuriating? The academic Gary Gumpert provided a partial answer. Muzak, he said, is “a kind of amniotic fluid that surrounds us. It never startles us, it is never too loud, it is never too silent; it’s always there.”

The American heavy rocker Ted Nugent put it more forcefully, noting: “Muzak is an evil force in today’s society, causing people to lapse into uncontrollable fits of blandness. It’s been responsible for ruining some of the best minds of our generation.”

Research has shown that careful selection of the right background music can affect how much time we think

Stores are using music that engages rather than sedates to keep us browsing

has passed while waiting in a queue or how sweet or bitter we think our food tastes.

Apparently you can persuade

shoppers to buy French rather than German wine by playing them a soundtrack of Piaf and Aznavour. If a restaurant wants to turn tables quickly to maximise profit margins, they can make us eat faster by playing higher-tempo music. The research on this even has a metric that translates the familiar BPM (beats per minute) into bites-per-minute.

The market leader in the contemporary ‘background music’ industry is Mood Media, which supplies muzak to more than 560,000 global locations, from Sainsbury’s to KFC and euphemistically claims that: “We help brands connect with their customers.”

Spotify is now a partner in a ‘background music’ supplier named Soundtrack Your Brand. Then there is also Music Concierge, which “provides bespoke soundtracks to the luxury hotel, food and beverage and retail industries”, including Harrods and Claridge’s, and boasts that it “specialises in curating playlists to create brand identities and atmospheres that encourage repeat visits.”



The changing nature of retail has provided plenty of opportunities for these new-styled muzak companies as online shopping has forced many high-street businesses to attempt to repackage their stores as a “destination” offering a “retail experience” rather than simply a functional place in which you can go to buy stuff.

This means playing music that is often far more interesting than the soft-focussed, orchestrated ersatz muzak of the past. Stores want to keep customers browsing for as long as possible, and music that engages rather than sedates has become the order of the day. Yet despite attempts to make muzak cool, it remains one of the most hideous aspects of modern living – the “amniotic fluid” described by Professor Gumpert from which there is seemingly no escape.

Fight for your rights

I’m delighted to report that a fightback is underway. Pipedown has been campaigning “for freedom from unwanted music in public places” for more than two decades and boasts a coterie of celebrity supporters such as Stephen Fry and Joanna Lumley, who claims to have run out of stores “unable to purchase the object of my desire, because of hellish piped music.” Pipedown’s successes include helping to dissuade Marks & Spencer from playing piped music in its stores over the past two years (a policy which seems to be under review again) and persuading Morrisons supermarkets to introduce a ‘quiet hour’. Yet there have been recent defeats, too. The Nationwide Building Society, which for a long time prided itself on not using piped music, introduced it for the first time last year. Anyone who values music and wants to join me in the battle against this virulent musical abuse should check out Pipedown’s website at pipedown.org.uk ●

Shopping can be hellish enough without having to contend with terrible music



NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Pipes of peace

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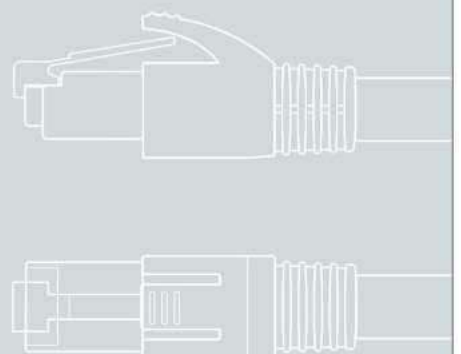
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CONTRIBUTORS

Jeff Ginn, Paul Hiron, Paul Hocker, James Hughes, Cliff Joseph, Jason Kennedy, James Parker, David Price, Neville Roberts, Ed Selley, Adam Smith, James Stroud, Luiz Thuy, David Vivian, Chris Ward, Nigel Williamson

PHOTOGRAPHY

Mike Prior

ADVERTISING

Sales Richard Morris **Tel:** 07834 346 461
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MANAGEMENT TEAM

Group Editor Paul Miller

Group Art Editor John Rook

Chief Executive Owen Davies

Published by AVTech Media Ltd
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